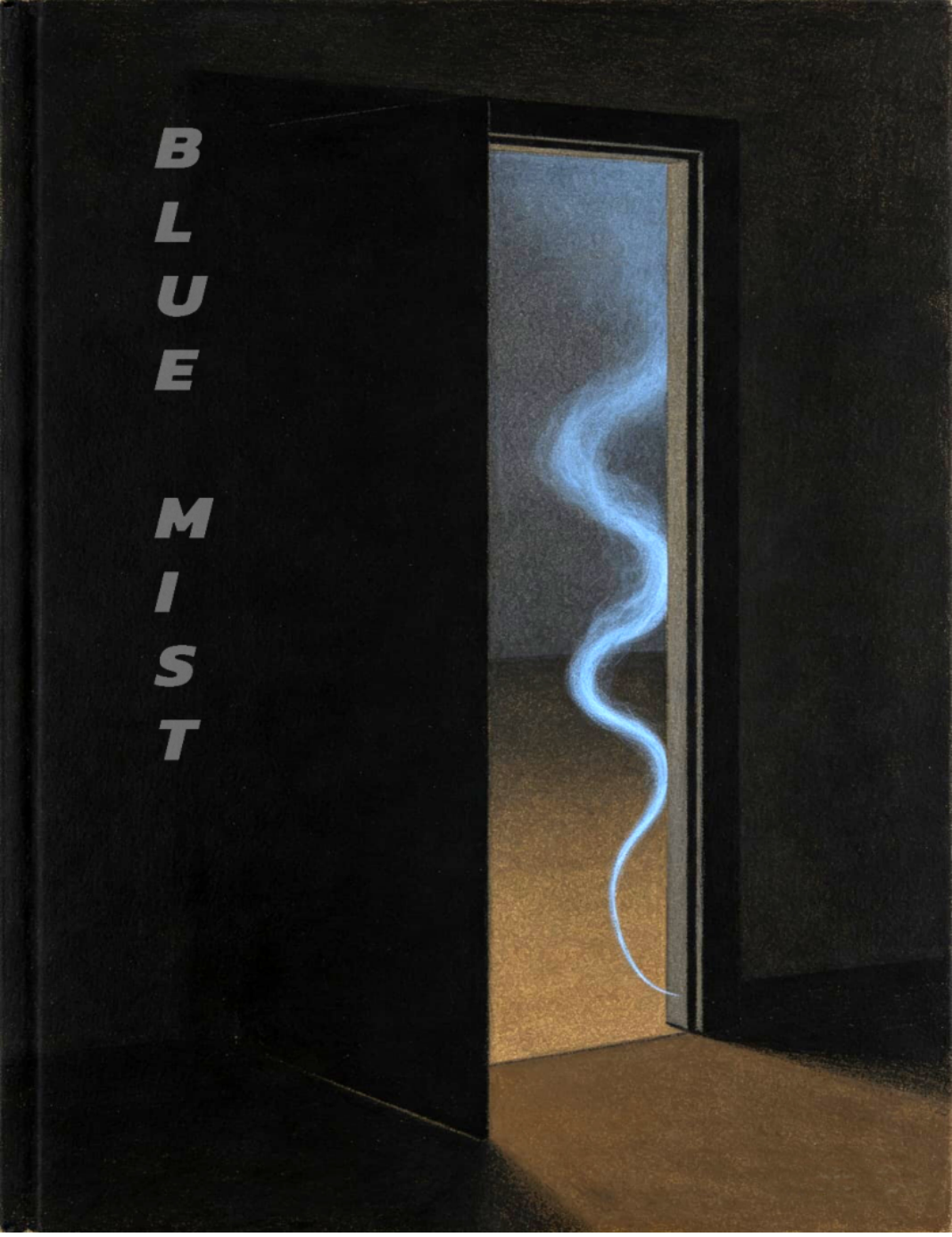
BLUE MIST

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C. Aldave

FOREWORD

The first thing to be said about *Blue Mist* is that it is not an easy book to classify. It is not a novel, not poetry, not an essay, although it participates in all three genres with the naturalness of someone who does not know genres exist and can therefore move among them without asking permission. It is, rather, a successful — and for that reason unsettling — attempt to capture in words something that narrative prose rarely dares to touch: time as it is lived from within, without the order that chronology imposes, without the coherence that memory pretends to have, without the distance that conventional narrative demands between the one who tells and what is told.

The book's structure is its first gesture of honesty. Brief chapters, almost all with titles, but the title does not always anticipate what follows; sometimes it diverts, sometimes it contradicts. The narrator — a woman of seventy, unnamed, or with a name the book does not reveal because revealing it would reduce her to something that no longer belongs to her — moves back and forth between moments of her life without chronological order, without warning, without the transition that realist prose usually offers as a courtesy to the reader. A leap. And the reader, if they accept that leap, discovers that the book's coherence is not in the sequence of events but in something deeper: the emotional texture that unites all those moments, the way pain and joy and nostalgia and serenity repeat across the years as variations on a single theme.

That theme, of course, is memory. But not memory as archive, but memory as creative act, as something that is rewritten each time it is visited. The narrator knows this, and the book says it with a clarity that needs no underlining: we do not remember what happened; we remember what we have said happened. And after seventy years of telling ourselves who we are, there is no way of knowing where the fact ends and the version begins. The twenty-five-cent coin that shines with a shine no real coin has, the mother's hand that was firm or perhaps trembling, the bar of women alone that perhaps never existed: all of this is memory, and memory is also fiction, and fiction, in this book, is the only truth available.

There is no cynicism in that affirmation. The narrator does not lament the fragility of memory; she celebrates it. Or more precisely, she inhabits it. The book is not an elegy for what is lost, but an inventory of what remains, even if it remains deformed, even if it remains only as an image that can no longer be fully trusted. And that ambivalence — the certainty that something was real and the impossibility of proving it — is the book's emotional center.

The style is equal to that ambivalence. Aldave's prose is precise without being cold, poetic without being ornamental. It has the quality of what seems simple

but is not: every sentence is worked so that emotion arrives without the interference of rhetoric. The reader does not feel manipulated, but accompanied. There is an intimacy in the narrative voice that does not seek easy complicity, but genuine complicity: the complicity of one who knows that the other has also had to tell and retell their own life until they no longer know what was and what was invented.

The title, *Blue Mist*, is an image that runs throughout the book. The blue mist that enters through a doorframe, that never fully enters, that always leaves a part outside, available to withdraw if necessary. That mist is memory itself, or it is death, or it is love, or it is all of these things at once. The book does not resolve the metaphor; it sustains it. And in sustaining it, it turns it into something more than an image: into a way of being in the world. Entering halfway, never fully, always with a part outside, in case things get ugly and you need to leave quickly, or in case outside, suddenly, becomes interesting. That is the wisdom the narrator has learned in seventy years. And the book, by sharing it, offers it to the reader without asking for anything in return.

There is in *Blue Mist* a literary genealogy worth mentioning, even if the book does not claim it. The fragmentation and attention to apparently insignificant details — the sock on the floor, the cold hand peeling a potato, the weight of a coin — recall the best tradition of consciousness literature, from Virginia Woolf to the finest Proust, but without the density that sometimes makes those texts an exercise in patience. Aldave is more economical, more direct. Emotion does not linger in extended descriptions; it condenses into an image, into a phrase, into a pause that the reader fills with their own experience.

And yet, it is not an easy book. Not in the sense of difficulty, but in the sense of demand: it asks the reader to stay with the discomfort, not to seek answers, to accept that the narrator is not going to tell them what all of this means. Death, in this book, is a companion, not an enemy. And that acceptance — which is not resignation, but something closer to the peace that comes from having looked into the abyss and discovered that the abyss also looks at you, and that this is not terrible, that this is the human condition — is perhaps Aldave's greatest achievement.

Most books that attempt to speak of old age and death fall into one of two extremes: the sentimentality of nostalgia or the hardness of disillusionment. *Blue Mist* avoids both. It does not idealize the past nor pity itself. The narrator knows she was young and did not know how to see it; knows she was beautiful and did not know how to receive it; knows that her life slipped away in what seemed like insignificant details and that those details were, in fact, life itself. And she says it without drama, without the solemnity that sometimes accompanies wisdom. She says it as one who tells a friend something they already knew, but needs to hear one more time.

It is, in that sense, an honest book. And that honesty, in a literary world that often rewards display, is itself a form of courage.

I

A woman alone in a bar full of women alone.

That should be an oxymoron, and it isn't. That is the first discovery of the night, and there is still time before dawn.

She calls herself — it doesn't matter what, she stopped using her name out loud some time ago, she only tells it to waiters and forms, nothing more — and she walked in thinking she would be truly alone, alone as one is in an empty house, and instead she found this: twelve, fifteen tables, each with a woman, each with a glass, none looking at the others, all looking at exactly the same point in the air that exists nowhere in the bar.

It is the end of something. She knows this with the physical certainty with which one knows it's going to rain, before the first drop falls, when the air has already changed color. She doesn't yet know the end of what. It could be the end of a marriage, of a job, of a city, of a way of believing in things. The feeling is always the same, only the name we give it afterward changes, once it has passed and we need to order it into a sentence.

She orders something. It doesn't matter what. The waiter writes it down without looking at her, with the sad efficiency of someone who has already guessed that this table will yield neither conversation nor generous tip, only well-paid silence.

She thinks: all these women arrived by different paths and exit with the same gesture. Someone could do a study. Someone should. Loneliness has a grammar, and this city, tonight, is conjugating it in every person except the first person plural.

Because that's the strange thing: if they are all alone in the same way, in the same place, at the same time, are they really alone? Or are they a crowd disguised as individuals, a company that refuses to recognize itself as such because recognition would mean speaking, and speaking would mean admitting that the end each one is chewing in her corner has the same shape as the end of the one next to her?

She is not going to speak. None of them is going to speak. That is the unwritten rule of bars like this: one comes here to be accompanied by strangers who respect your right not to be rescued.

She raises her glass. There is no one to clink it with. She does it anyway, slightly upward, slightly toward nowhere in particular, and in that tiny gesture — which no one sees, which no one cares about — the entire ending is

contained: not the crash, not the slamming door, but this. A toast with no recipient, in a room full of people toasting the same thing, not knowing they are many doing exactly the same thing, alone, together, at the same time, forever that night and never again after.

Through the doorjamb, a little of the blue mist entered, as if the street outside had decided to peek in uninvited, curious to see what kind of ending was cooking inside.

No one watched it enter. That too is part of the rule: in a place where everyone is busy not looking at each other, even less will anyone look at the mist, which at least has the decency to ask for nothing, to write nothing down on a little notepad, to expect no tip.

But she did look at it. The woman with the glass raised toward nowhere. She saw that blue wisp licking the doorframe and thought, with that kind of thought that arrives whole and from nowhere: *the mist is also alone, and that's why it enters where there is company without committing to stay.*

Because that's what mist does, if you look closely. It enters a little. Never all of itself. It always leaves a part outside, in the street, available to withdraw without anyone noticing the exact moment it decided to leave. It is the most elegant way of being in a place that she knows: that of someone who never fully closes the door behind them, in case things inside turn ugly and they need to leave quickly, or in case outside, suddenly, becomes interesting.

Blue. Not white, not gray, as a textbook mist should be. Blue like the exact moment before a color turns into another and you still don't know which. That blue that belongs neither to night nor dawn but to the hinge between the two, the instant that has no proper name because it lasts so little that no one bothered to christen it.

She thought: that mist saw something in the street that it didn't want to stay and finish seeing, and that's why it slipped in here, to this bar of women alone, looking for someone else's ending so it wouldn't have to keep its own.

We are all that tonight, she told herself. Mist that enters a little. None willing to fully commit to the place where she is sitting, each with half a person still outside, in the street, in the car, in the house she left or doesn't want to return to.

The blue wisp advanced a meter, two, feeling the wooden floor like someone

who doesn't fully trust the solidity of what belongs to another. And it stayed there, floating low, at the exact height of no one's knees in particular, as if waiting to see who, among all those present, would dare first to acknowledge that she too had entered like that: halfway, with the other half still outside, available for flight.

A sob was heard. No one looked. No one wanted to know whose it was, because it could have been one's own.

That is the real pact of this place, the one written on no sign and explained by no waiter when you sit down: here, a sound has no owner as long as no one turns around to claim it. As soon as someone looks, the sob becomes someone's, it has a name, a history, a face that afterward cannot be unseen. As long as no one looks, it belongs to all equally, and that — strangely — weighs less.

The woman with the raised glass felt the sob enter her through the same side the mist had entered, as if both things came from the same nameless source. And she thought, again with that thought that arrives fully formed: *if I look, I stop being alone in my own ending and start being accompanied in another's, and I don't know if I have room for two.*

Because there is a cruel economy to these things. One can carry one's own ending, snugly, the exact size of one's own shoulders. But looking at another's is adopting it a little, even if only for two seconds, even if only with one's eyes. And tonight, no one arrived with room to spare.

The sob did not repeat itself. Or it repeated so softly that it could no longer be distinguished from the general noise of the bar, the ice falling into another glass, the music someone had put on too low for anyone to care. It dissolved there, in that zone where private sounds go to die in public, protected precisely by the number of people who decide not to hear them.

But a vibration remained. As if the air, after the sob, had not returned exactly to its previous shape. The blue mist, still at the height of no one's knees, seemed to pause for an instant — or so it seemed to her, who was already disposed to see intentions in the mist, at that hour, in that state.

She thought: *it could be me next. It could have been me a minute ago and I didn't realize.*

Because that's how fine the line is, in a bar like this, between the one who

looks at her glass and the one who suddenly, without warning, lets out the sound she had been carrying from the street, from before the street, from long before this night that will still end as it had to end: with everyone looking the other way, and the ending, whatever each one's ending had been, staying there, ownerless, floating low, like the mist.

A schoolyard, mid-morning recess, that sun that in childhood seems to last longer than in any other time of life. A ten-year-old boy hurls himself against the air over and over, improvised mortar on the bald grass, looking out of the corner of his eye to see if she — some girl, sitting on the edge of the sandbox, busy with something that isn't him — is watching him.

She doesn't look. Or she looks less than he needs, which in the arithmetic of ten years is exactly the same as not looking at all.

He does a handstand. Falls. Gets up fast, as if the fall had been part of the plan. Does a cartwheel, two, a third that already comes out crooked because his body starts failing just when he most needs it not to. He looks. She's still looking elsewhere, at the grass, at a bug, at nothing.

So he stops trying through the air and tries through words, which is all he has left when his body has already given everything it had to give that morning. He approaches. He's still breathing hard, from the effort, and also from something else that at ten has no name but already weighs as much as if it did.

"Do you want to be my girlfriend?"

He says it without any acrobatics. Without spin, without adornment, with the same direct clumsiness with which a ten-year-old body throws itself against the grass without properly calculating the fall. There's no strategy in the question. It's the same question he's going to ask, different each time and always the same, for the rest of his life: *look at me. Stay. Choose me among all the ones who don't matter to you.*

And somewhere — not in that schoolyard, not that day, but somewhere that doesn't yet exist and is already written — there is a woman alone in a bar full of women alone, with a glass raised toward no one, who was, once, the girl on the sandbox, or the one who asked the question, or neither and both at the same time, because the end of one story and the beginning of another are sometimes the same blue mist entering through the same doorjamb, looking for who, this time, dares to look.

Jump of fifty years.

Suddenly, looking out the window, she discovers that her life has passed, and it truly seems like yesterday.

There is no transition for this. There is no narrative bridge decent enough to explain how one gets from a schoolyard to this window, to this four-in-the-afternoon light that enters differently, more tired, as if even the light now struggles to climb so many floors. That's why there's no bridge. Time negotiates transitions with no one. One day you're doing a handstand on the grass and the next — which turns out to be this — you're looking through a window with a cup that has already gone cold without anyone noticing when.

Fifty years fit, and that's the obscene part, in the same space as a blink. She didn't feel them pass one by one. No one feels them that way. They are felt in a block, all together, all at once, the day you stand before the glass and the reflection returns a face that doesn't match the age you carry inside, which remains, stubbornly, the same as always.

Because inside, she didn't age. Inside, she still has the exact age of the sandbox, of the bar of women alone, of all the loose scenes that she never quite knew in what order they happened or if they happened in that order, because real time isn't linear, it's a deck of cards that shuffles itself anew every time someone looks back.

And that's what it seems to her, there, before the window: that it was yesterday. Not as a figure of speech. As an exact, physical perception of the real size of time when measured from inside and not from the calendar. Yesterday she asked the clumsy question in the yard. Yesterday she raised the glass toward no one. Yesterday the blue mist entered. Yesterday the sob was heard that no one wanted to claim.

And today — which is the same yesterday, just with a little more dust on it — her life has passed, and the strange thing isn't that it went. The strange thing is that no one told her it was leaving while it was leaving. It left in silence, with the same discretion with which mist enters through a doorjamb: a little, never all, always leaving a part outside, available, as if still — at this age, at this window — there remained some possibility of going back to look for it.

Flashback. Children.

She doesn't know which one to start with, and that too is part of what time does to memory: it orders them by weight, not by date. The first one that appears isn't the first one born. It's the one that still weighs the most, there, in the chest, fifty years later.

She holds him in her arms in a room that smells of disinfectant and something sweet she never knew how to name. He weighs nothing. He weighs everything. Both at the same time, that is the first of the contradictions that a child teaches a mother before he can speak, before he can do anything other than cry and seek the breast.

She thinks: *this is also the end of something.* The end of being only oneself. From now on, there is a loose body in the world that will hurt every time it bumps itself, even if the bump doesn't touch her even a hair.

Another flash: the same child, or perhaps the second, at ten years old, in a schoolyard, doing clumsy acrobatics so a girl will look at him. She wasn't there to see it. She finds out later, from the bump on his head, the scraped knee, that mixture of pride and shame that children bring when something went wrong but was, deep down, brave.

"Did you ask her if she wanted to be your girlfriend?"

"No."

A lie, the first of many a child will tell a mother, not out of malice but because there are territories that close themselves, like doors the wind gradually pushes without anyone touching them.

Another flash, later: the same face, a different age, sitting on the edge of a bed, telling her something she doesn't want to fully remember because it still hurts, about leaving, about a faraway place, about a life that wasn't the one she had imagined for him and that she had to learn to love anyway, because it was his, not hers.

And the last flash, the one that weighs the most, the one that brought her to this window: a different room, she already older in that memory too, and he — which one of them, if she had more than one, if this is one story or several getting confused at this hour of the afternoon? — telling her he loves her, without acrobatics, without spin, with the same direct clumsiness of ten years old.

She wonders, before the glass, the cold cup in her hand: at what moment did the girl on the sandbox become this window? At what moment did the one who asked "do you want to be my girlfriend" become a man who no longer

lives with her, who has his own blue mist entering through his own doorjamb, somewhere she can no longer see?

Fifty years, and it seems like yesterday, because in some sense — the only one that matters at this hour, with this light — it was yesterday. All of it was.

Flashback. Sixty years.

She remembers this with a clarity that no other memory has, none, not even those from last week, which already blur and escape her like water between her fingers. This one doesn't. This one is intact, stored somewhere that time doesn't know how to open.

A twenty-five cent coin.

She still sees it — now, before the window, with the cold cup — with the exact weight it had in the palm of a hand that was small then, a hand that is no longer that hand but that in the memory remains that one, with that skin, with those lines that still knew nothing of what the years would write on top.

The coin shone in a way no coin actually shines, except in a child's memory. It had a particular coldness, that coldness of old metal touched by many hands before hers, a coldness she liked and didn't know why she liked.

And her mother took her hand.

That is what remains, more than the coin, more than the street around them, more than any other detail that should matter and doesn't: her mother's hand around hers, that particular way of holding it, neither firm nor soft, with that firmness of someone who knows they are crossing a street with something valuable and won't let it go for anything.

She doesn't remember what she bought with the coin. She doesn't remember if she spent it that day or kept it for weeks in a drawer, looking at it from time to time as one looks at a small treasure. She doesn't remember the name of the street, nor the season, nor if it was cold or hot.

She remembers the hand. She remembers the weight of the coin. She remembers — and this is what makes her cry now, silently, before the glass, in a way that no one in a bar full of women alone would have wanted to claim either — that in that exact moment she felt, for the first time she can name, absolutely safe. The whole world could do anything around her and it didn't

matter, because there was a hand larger than hers holding her, and a small coin shining, and nothing more was needed.

Sixty years. And that is the scene that survived all the others, the one that didn't let itself be worn down, the one that remains there, whole, when everything else — the children, the acrobatics, the bar, the blue mist — is already starting to blur with sleep and fiction and what could have been and wasn't.

Because perhaps that's what it's about, in the end. Not what one manages to save on purpose. But what saves itself, without permission, because something in that instant decided that this was the one that would remain, among all possible instants, when nothing else remained.

Another sob.

This one isn't in the bar. It's here, now, before the window, and this time it does have an owner, this time there's no one around who can pretend not to hear it, because there's no one around. Only her, the cold cup, the four-in-the-afternoon light that is already starting to leave too, discreetly, as everything else left.

It comes out on its own. She doesn't call it. Doesn't prepare it. It comes from that place where her mother's hand was stored, the coin, the absolute safety of six years old, and as it comes out it drags with it, unintentionally, everything else: the child in arms, the one who lied about the sandbox girl, the one who went far away, the glass raised toward no one in a bar that perhaps never existed except in this afternoon, this window, this way memory has of inventing bars in order to cry in the company of women who are, all of them, herself.

Because that is the belated discovery, the one that arrives fifty or sixty years later and not before, because before there was no time, there was living: that she was always that woman alone in the bar full of women alone. That the blue mist entering through the doorjamb was exactly this, this afternoon, this sob coming out without permission from a body that no longer has the age it feels inside.

She doesn't cover her face. There's no need, no one's watching, and if someone is — if God, if time, if the twenty-five cent coin turned into something bigger were watching from somewhere — they've already seen it all before, they already know how this ends, because this is always how it

ends: with a window, an afternoon, and everything that was lived leaving again, faster the second time, summarized, compressed, as if the whole life had been only the draft of this weeping.

Her mother's hand is no longer there. That is what the sob finally says, in the language that needs no words: that at some point, between the sandbox and this window, that hand was let go, and since then — without her fully knowing it, without anyone telling her — she has been crossing alone every one of the streets she had left to cross.

A single certainty jumps out at her: she always knew she wanted to be a writer. She always knew she was a writer.

This isn't a memory. Memories have dates, have scenes, have a coin or a hand or a yard with bald grass. This doesn't. This was before all the memories, beneath them, holding them up as paper holds ink: without the ink needing to thank it, without the paper asking for anything in return.

She knew it before she could read, surely. She knew it the same way a body knows it will grow, without needing anyone to explain biology: as a direction, not as a decision. No one chooses the north of a compass. The compass simply stays still until something moves it, and it always points to the same side.

That's why, now, before the window, with her face still damp from the sob that came out without permission, this certainty doesn't arrive as comfort or surprise. It arrives as something that was always there, available, even in the years she didn't write a single line, even in the years of the child in arms and the other who went far away, even in the years when life — that noisy thing, that thing that demands schedules and coins and hands that are later let go — left no room to sit down and write anything.

A writer all the same. A writer in her head, in the sentences she assembled while washing dishes that no one ever heard, in the endings she invented for other people's conversations, in that habit — which she herself never knew if it was virtue or affliction — of looking at everything that happened to her and thinking, at the same time as she lived it, about how she was going to tell it.

That's why the yard with her son had the shape of a scene. That's why the bar of women alone — if it existed, if she didn't invent it this afternoon — was stored with that precision of detail that only someone stores who, without meaning to, was already narrating while looking. That's why the twenty-five

cent coin still shines with that impossible shine: because sixty years ago, a girl who didn't yet know the word "writer" was already, without knowing it, storing the material.

It wasn't a postponed life. That's what she understands, there, with the newly fallen certainty: she didn't postpone anything. She wrote all the time, without paper, without ink, without anyone — not even herself — realizing that this was, exactly, what she was doing while doing everything else.

And yet.

The certainty lasts as long as a certainty lasts at sixty years old, which is less than it promises when it arrives. Because immediately, right there, before the window, the other question appears, the one she hadn't wanted to ask until now: was the coin twenty-five cents, or did she invent that number afterward, in one of the many times she told the scene, until telling it became indistinguishable from having lived it?

Because this is how it works, and she knows it better than anyone, being what she always was without knowing it: a writer doesn't store memories. She rewrites them every time she visits them. And after sixty years of visits, there's no way to know how much of the original day remains and how much is the accumulation of all the times that day was narrated — to herself, in silence, while washing dishes, while looking at a window like this one.

Her mother's hand: was it firm or trembling? She remembers it firm. But she also remembers having doubted it before, on another afternoon, twenty years ago, when she still had someone to ask and didn't ask.

The son who did acrobatics in the yard: was he the one who asked the girl to be his girlfriend, or was it the other one, and did this memory lend it to him without her realizing, because children, seen from a distance, start sharing gestures they perhaps never had in common?

The bar of women alone — she suspected it from the beginning, but now she admits it fully: she doesn't know if it existed. It could have been a real afternoon, long ago, or it could have been something she assembled later from pieces of several afternoons, a tidy synthesis of a loneliness that at the time was much more disorderly than any bar.

And if that's the case — if she can't swear the bar existed, nor that the coin was that exact amount, nor that the hand was firm and not trembling — what is she left with? What is real, if all she has is the most recent version of each memory, polished by all the previous times she told it?

Perhaps this: that it doesn't matter. That the uncertainty doesn't take anything away from the hand in hers, nor from the coin shining in a way no coin shines in reality. That being a writer, perhaps, isn't having a faithful memory. It's being unable to stop every memory, over time, from becoming a little more true than it was — true in a different way, more necessary, the only kind of truth that remains for someone after sixty years of telling herself who she was.

She doesn't know if the certainty of being a writer is a real memory or a story she told herself so many times that it ended up being true by accumulation.

Nor does that, now, matter very much to her.

II

What remained of a Tuesday afternoon

It was nothing. That must be said first, so that later it doesn't seem more than it was.

A Tuesday, at three-thirty, someone rang the doorbell and it was the mailman with an envelope that wasn't for her — wrong address, a name similar to hers but not hers — and she, instead of saying "no, that person doesn't live here" and closing the door, stayed a moment longer looking at the envelope, as if the similar name were a version of herself that had taken another path at some crossroads she no longer remembered.

That is the whole event. Nothing happened afterward. The mailman apologized, left, she closed the door, went back to what she was doing, which she doesn't really remember either.

And yet — that's the word that for twenty years has been following her steps, *and yet*, always crouched at the end of every certainty — that Tuesday afternoon returned. Not once. It returned for years, without warning, in the middle of completely unrelated things: cooking, in a traffic jam, in the middle of a movie that had nothing to do with mailmen or envelopes.

It always returned the same: the similar name, the fraction of a second when she didn't know if the envelope was a mistake or a correction.

There's no trauma here. No revelation. It's the opposite: it's such a small event that it doesn't even qualify as a dinner-table anecdote, one of those you tell and the other person says "oh" and doesn't know what else to add because there's nothing else to add.

But it's still there. More alive, in some sense, than entire afternoons that did have weight, that did deserve to stay.

Why that one and not another? She doesn't know. She suspects — and this is barely a suspicion, not a certainty like the one about being a writer, this is smaller, more timid — that memory doesn't store what's important. It stores what got left halfway, what didn't finish closing into a story with a moral. The wrong envelope meant nothing, changed nothing, taught her nothing. That's why it stayed open. That's why it returns.

The things she did understand, the ones that did close with a neat lesson, those got filed away properly and don't bother her anymore. The ones that didn't — the envelope, the similar name, the person she could have been and wasn't

because of some random crossroads — those remain loose, circling around, bumping from time to time against the walls of some random Tuesday, fifty years later, without asking permission, without warning, without explaining this time either why.

My hands are cold and I don't know why, because the kitchen isn't cold, because it's one of those afternoons they call temperate, and yet my hands are like this, as if they were still in some other winter that the body decided not to let go.

I'm peeling a potato. That's the only certain thing about this moment: the knife, the potato, the peel falling in a spiral on the counter. Everything else — the cold that doesn't belong, the feeling that someone else should be in this kitchen and isn't — that I no longer know if it's from now or if it slipped in from somewhere else, from another afternoon with another potato and another knife, so long ago I no longer keep count.

There it is again, the point of view changing hands without permission: she peels the potato. She is cold. Someone watches her peel from the kitchen door, a boy, perhaps the same one from the acrobatics, perhaps another, leaning against the frame with that way children have of occupying a doorway as if it were a place and not just a passage.

"What are you doing?" he says, though he can already see.

"Nothing," she says, which is the answer always given to that question when what one is doing is too small to explain and too important to call nothing.

And there, again, without warning: the potato in my hand, not hers. The cold is mine. The boy in the doorway is looking at me, and I don't know what to tell him because the truth is I'm thinking about something else, about someone who is no longer here, and peeling the potato is the only way I found this afternoon not to think about it fully, to think about it only at the edges, while my hands do something useful.

This too will return, like the mailman's envelope, like the coin. I know it while I'm living it, with that strange double awareness of someone who already suspects, in the very moment, that she's going to have to carry this afternoon for years without having asked to carry it: the cold in my hands, the half-peeled potato, the boy in the doorway waiting for an answer I will never fully give him, neither now, nor later, nor at sixty years old when I return to this kitchen from a different window and no longer know if the cold was real or if

I invented it to be able to cry for something that had no name yet.

III

Sunday

The silence of Sundays has a different texture from the rest of the week, thicker, as if the entire world had agreed to lower its voice without telling anyone. She notices it as soon as she opens her eyes, before looking at the clock, before knowing what time it is: it's Sunday, says the silence, not the calendar.

The bed is larger than it should be. That too is a Sunday fact, one that doesn't show during the week because during the week there's urgency, you have to get up fast, there's no time to feel the size of things. Sunday there is. Sunday the mattress extends toward a side that no longer has an occupant, and that cold side — again the cold, always the same cold that doesn't correspond to the room's temperature — says more than any clock could about how long it's been.

She stays like that for a while, not moving, looking at the ceiling. It's an exercise she does every Sunday and never decided to start doing; it appeared one day as true habits appear, without an inauguration ceremony: counting, on the ceiling, the same cracks as always, in the same order, like someone praying without admitting they're praying.

It smells like nothing in particular, and that too is Sunday. The other days the house smells of something — freshly brewed coffee, toasted bread, the soap of someone who showered before her — but Sunday, this morning, the house has no smell of its own yet, it's waiting for someone to decide what will be smelled today.

She gets up. Her feet on the cold floor — third time cold appears in this scene and she no longer knows if it's literal or if it's the only word left to name the other thing, the one that has no name and needs one all the same.

In the kitchen, the sun enters in a way that only enters on Sundays, slower, as if it had all day to reach the table and didn't need to hurry. She puts the kettle on. While waiting, she looks out the window — always the window, always that habit of looking outside when inside there's something she doesn't dare look at yet — and sees the empty street, a dog crossing with no visible owner, the neighbors' blinds still down.

Everyone is sleeping. She isn't. She never slept Sundays the way she sleeps the rest of the week, a lighter sleep, closer to the surface, as if the body knew that on Sunday one must be available for something, even if that something never arrives, even if the whole Sunday goes by peeling a potato, looking at

cracks in the ceiling, drinking a mate that cools faster than it should because her hands get distracted before the hand reaches the mouth.

And then — silent, without a punchline, without anyone announcing it — comes the thought that Sundays always bring and other days don't: *this too, someday, will be a memory I will doubt.* This kitchen, this slow sun, this cooling mate. It will return in thirty years, forty, different from how it was, more polished, sadder or less, depending on what else has happened by then that changes its color from behind.

For now, however, it's just this: a Sunday, a kettle starting to sing softly, and no one yet asking her to explain why today's silence weighs differently than yesterday's.

Oh my love, without you I don't understand waking. Oh my love, without you my bed is wide.

She doesn't know where that comes from. It appears to her like that, whole, with tune and all, while the mate cools for the third time this morning. Did someone sing it, long ago, in this same kitchen? Did she hear it on a radio in another house, another time, and did it stick like songs one doesn't choose, that enter through an open window and never leave? Or did she just invent it, now, without knowing, and is she attributing it to a past that never had it, because she needs this morning to have a soundtrack and it doesn't?

It doesn't matter. She also learned that, or is just learning it, this same morning: it doesn't matter if she dreamed it or remembered it, because at this distance from the facts — whatever the facts may have been — the difference between dreaming and remembering is a difference that only matters to someone who still needs things to have happened in only one way.

The wide bed. That much is true, that she doesn't doubt, because she's feeling it now, in her body, not in the lyric of a song that perhaps never existed: the mattress extending toward the side that no longer has anyone, and that song — dreamed, remembered, invented this same morning to name what had no name — names it better than any phrase she could assemble awake.

She thinks: perhaps that's what songs one doesn't remember learning do. They don't come from outside. They come from inside, disguised as memory, so that one can sing them without the shame of inventing in the very moment of pain. It's easier to say "this already existed, I just remembered it" than to say "I'm creating this now, because I need it, because the wide bed needs a tune

and no one gave me one, so I give it to myself."

And perhaps — she thinks, with the mate completely cold, without the desire to reheat it — her whole life did that. She sang songs she attributed to a more generous, more populated past, so as not to have to admit she was inventing them alone, in empty kitchens, on Sundays where the silence weighed differently and no one but her could say why.

Whisper or remember, she had said, without really knowing which of the two she was doing.

Both, perhaps. Like everything else in this story. Like the coin, like the hand, like the bar she doesn't know if it existed.

Sinto tua falta, she said to the air.

And there, in that language that isn't hers, that she learned on some trip or in some life we haven't yet told, she finds something that Spanish didn't give her: a word, *falta* — which isn't absence nor pain, but both mixed with a precision that in Spanish would require a whole clumsy sentence full of clarifications.

I feel your lack. Not "I feel that you are lacking." I feel the lack itself, as if lack were a thing with its own weight, something that can be felt the same way one feels the cold in one's hands or the slow sun entering through a Sunday window. It's not the absence of something that was. It's a new presence, that of what isn't there, occupying a place that didn't exist before because before, the lack didn't exist either.

Why in Portuguese and not in her own language? She doesn't quite know how to explain that either. Perhaps because the truest things need to come out through a side door, a language that isn't the everyday one, so they don't get confused with the phrases she's already said too many times in her own language and that for that very reason have lost their edge. *Te extraño* she said so many times, in Spanish, that the phrase wore out like a coin passed from hand to hand. *Sinto tua falta*, on the other hand, still has the sharp edge of the newly minted.

To the air. To no one. That too should be noted: she didn't say it looking at a photo, nor sitting before an empty chair with the already familiar habit of staged grief. She said it like that, out of nowhere, between peeling the potato of another afternoon and the mate of this morning, as true things are said: without an audience, without needing anyone to hear it for it to count.

And the air, which never responds, this time didn't respond either. But it stayed a moment different, as if the words in that foreign language had changed something in the kitchen's temperature, one degree, less, enough for her to notice and not know afterward if she had truly felt it or if — again, always that doubt that no longer frightens her as before — she had invented it, so that Sunday morning would have, at least, an instant worth keeping among those that don't get lost.

Saudade.

It doesn't translate, and that's exactly the point: it's surrounded. Surrounded by "I love you," which isn't enough because *saudade* doesn't need the beloved object to be present to exist, unlike "I love you," which needs someone in front, even if imagined. Surrounded by "sorrow," which also isn't enough because *sorrow* is too dark, too hopeless, and *saudade* has, inside, a strange pleasure that the English word doesn't admit: the pleasure of missing something beautiful, even if it hurts, even if that pain is precisely what one is enjoying without wanting to call it enjoyment.

The Portuguese say that *saudade* is the only word in the world that has no exact equivalent in any other language, and by this point in the morning — the cold mate, the dreamed or remembered song, the lack spoken to the air in a borrowed language — she believes it. Because what she feels now isn't pure sadness, isn't joy, isn't nostalgia in the light sense that word is used for old records or childhood shows. It's that strange thing where the pain of something not being there intertwines with the sweetness of having had it, so tightly pressed together that they can no longer be separated without both breaking.

She thinks: perhaps that's why languages invent words like this, words that a neighboring language can't copy. It's not caprice nor national pride. It's that each culture, at some point in its history, finds itself before a feeling it experiences so often, with such frequency and weight, that it needs to name it with its own, exclusive word, so as not to have to assemble a long sentence every time it arrives.

And she? What word is she missing, in her language, for what she feels this morning? Because *saudade* fits her borrowed, elegant, almost too neat for what it really is, in her kitchen, any given Sunday: a messier mix, less poetic, made of cold mate and cold in her hands and a song she doesn't know if she dreamed, and the name similar to hers on an envelope from fifty years ago, and a coin that shone in a way no coin actually shines.

Perhaps there isn't a word. Perhaps what she feels doesn't fit in a single word because it's made of too many small things that never let themselves be ordered into a single category. And perhaps — she thinks this almost as a closing, as someone finally finding where to put the empty cup — that's what she got instead of a word: not *saudade*, not *sorrow*, not "I love you." She got, instead, the need to tell it at length, in fragments, in kitchens and windows and bars she doesn't know if they existed, because she wasn't lucky enough to be born in a language that gave her the exact word, and she had to build, slowly, sixty years' worth of material, to say the same thing *saudade* says in one.

Where did the beach come from? From nowhere she can point to, and yet there it is, suddenly, as if the Sunday kitchen had always had this secondary door through which one exits directly onto the sand, and no one — until now — had opened it.

No travel was needed. That's the strange part. One minute she was with the empty cup in her hand, thinking about words that don't belong to her, and the next she already has her feet on something that isn't tile but morning sand, that sand that hasn't yet been warmed by the sun and that's why resembles memory more than the real beach: always a little colder than one remembers it when remembered from afar.

And the sea. The sea doesn't have the delicacy of people, who at least pretend not to notice when someone ages before them. The sea breaks the same, without varying its gesture, showing in each wave the same thing it has always shown: that time owes no explanations to anyone, that it can repeat the same movement a million times without tiring, while she, on the shore, can no longer say the same of her own body.

Each breaker is a small blow of the same truth: *this goes on, and you won't go on the same way you follow this.* It doesn't say it with malice. The sea has no malice, has nothing, and for that very reason it's the only witness that won't lie to her out of compassion. A son would lie. A mirror, sometimes, also lies, depending on the light. The sea doesn't. The sea breaks and breaks and in each break there is a brutal honesty: your life slipped away in nothing, and here is the proof, repeated, infinite, indifferent to the fact that it hurts you to hear it.

And why in nothing? Because that's how it feels from the cold sand of this beach that came from nowhere: not as a tragedy with a name and surname, with causes that can be enumerated, but as a silent flight, without a visible thief, without struggle. One day you peel a potato. The next — which is the same day, just with more salt in the air and more sand underfoot — you're

standing before the sea wondering how it got so late without anyone telling you the clock was running differently than it seemed.

There is no answer the sea will give her, except the one it's already giving: keep breaking. Keep showing, with each wave identical to the one before, that the only real difference between this morning and all the beach mornings she could have had before is herself, a little more used, standing a little farther from the shore than she would dare to admit aloud.

A day without yesterday, a night without tomorrow.

That's what remains when the hinges are removed: neither memory pushing from behind, nor promise pulling from ahead. Only this, standing on the cold sand, with the sea breaking its same old truth, in a present that has nowhere to come from and nowhere to go.

It should frighten. A day without yesterday is a day without cause, without explanation for why what's happening is happening — why this beach, why this cold on her feet, why the sea decided to show itself just now, in the middle of a Sunday that began with peeling potatoes and continued with songs in Portuguese. And a night without tomorrow is worse still, because it takes from the present its oldest comfort, the one that says *this too will pass, this too will become a memory, give it time.*

But it doesn't frighten. Or it frightens in a strange way, the same way the silence of Sundays frightens: heavy, yes, but not hostile.

Because perhaps this is what she was looking for without knowing it, from the coin to the mailman's envelope, from her mother's hand to the song she doesn't know if she dreamed: a place without dates. A moment that doesn't have to answer to the one before nor the one after, that doesn't have to mean anything in the chain of meanings she herself, a writer without knowing it, has been constructing since age six.

A day without yesterday doesn't remember the coin. Doesn't remember the bar, nor the window, nor the son who lied about the sandbox girl. It's clean in the way only things that haven't yet begun to be told are clean.

And a night without tomorrow doesn't have to worry about what this moment will become in thirty years, whether it will return distorted, sadder or less, whether someone will doubt it existed. It simply is. Without promise of persistence, without threat of forgetting. Both stopped mattering at the same

time, because both need an afterward to have meaning, and here there is no afterward.

She stays there, on that island without a date, while the sea keeps breaking — because the sea, even though it speaks of time, doesn't live in time the same way she does, doesn't age with each wave, has no yesterday or tomorrow of its own, only the eternal breaking that she found so hard to understand this morning.

Perhaps this is the closest thing to rest she will get. Not sleep. Not death, yet. This strange parenthesis, without hinges, where for the first time in sixty years she doesn't have to ask herself if what she's living will be true later, when she remembers it.

Because she won't remember it. A day without yesterday leaves no memory behind. It stays whole, there, in the sand, with no one — not even herself, the one after — who can come and doubt if it was real.

If there is no yesterday or tomorrow, what is there?

She feels it's time to explain it to herself. She feels she has to be convincing with her argument, as if she were standing before a tribunal made of herself alone, judge and accused at the same time, and the sentence depended on whether she could find the exact words before the tide rose and carried away the possibility of saying it.

She starts like this: if there is no yesterday or tomorrow, there is this. The foot sunk in the cold sand, there, now. The sound of the water retreating before breaking again. The cold rising up the ankle and needing no yesterday to justify itself: it's not cold because it was cold before, nor will it continue being cold because it will be cold after. It's cold because it's cold, in this instant that has no neighbors.

That's what there is: the thing itself, without the story that normally surrounds it. Her whole life — she realizes now, standing there, arguing with no one but herself — she lived instants packaged in stories. This happens because that happened, this means such-and-such because later it will lead to such-and-such. Not a single loose second. Everything tied, everything with handles backward and forward, as if an instant could only exist if it had someone holding both hands.

But now she tries letting go. She tries, as an exercise, as if the argument

needed demonstration and not just statement: this cold foot leads nowhere. It's not the beginning of a cold, not the echo of another cold foot on another beach forty years ago. It's, nothing more, a foot, cold, now.

And it works. For a second, it works: the foot stops meaning, stops being tied to the chain, and in that release there is something that isn't exactly relief but resembles it, a close relative of relief, the relief of putting down a heavy suitcase even if only while you change hands.

Is the argument convincing? She asks herself, still judge, still accused. And the answer that comes to her isn't yes or no. It's this: it doesn't matter if it's fully convincing, because she already lived it while she was arguing it. The instant without yesterday or tomorrow doesn't need to win the trial. It already happened, it was already there, while she was building the defense.

What there is, then, is simply that: proof that for a second — just one, no more is needed — she could be in a place without history. And that place, even if it lasts little, even if yesterday returns soon with all its weight and tomorrow with all its threat, existed. It was real. As real as the coin, as real as the sea, as real as anything else that later, with time, she herself will begin to doubt was true or if she invented it, there, alone, standing on a sand that came from nowhere, arguing with no one but herself about what remains when all the hinges are removed.

IV

Four sides of a memory

I

The first side is the one that gets told.

Not the one that happened — that one is no longer available, if it ever was in the way one imagines things are available before they are remembered. The one that gets told. The one that has the shape of a sentence, a recognizable beginning, a place to end without seeming cut off.

She tells it like this: there was a kitchen, there was afternoon light, there was someone who is no longer sitting where they used to sit. She doesn't say more. Not because there isn't more but because beyond that begins the territory where memory and invention share a border without a sign, and she learned, late, that pointing to that border aloud is the only way to cross it without anyone — starting with herself — noticing she's crossing it.

What remains outside the account: the smell. The smell never enters the version that gets told because smell doesn't translate into words without becoming something else, without becoming a description of the smell instead of the smell itself. And she needs that smell to remain the smell, intact, untouched by language, stored somewhere in the body that the account can't reach.

That's why the first side always lacks something. Not by neglect. By custody.

II

The second side is the one remembered when no one asks.

Different from the first. The first has a listener, has form, has the light weight of things said aloud and that for that reason become a little less one's own. The second has no one in front. It arrives alone, uninvited, in the moment when the hands are busy with something that doesn't need the head — peeling, washing, folding — and precisely because of that the head is free for what normally stays outside to enter.

This side has no recognizable beginning. It starts in the middle, always in the middle, as if memory knew that beginnings are a convention for others and that alone, without witnesses, it can skip them.

What appears: the chair. Not the person who was in the chair — that comes

later, if it comes, if the memory decides to go that far. First the chair. The exact angle at which it was turned, a few degrees toward the window, as if whoever occupied it had been about to get up or about to stay and hadn't yet decided. That angle that she never described in the first side because she didn't know she remembered it until it appeared now, between one thing and another, without anyone asking.

And with the chair: the sound. Not music, not voices. The specific sound of that kitchen at that hour — the refrigerator, a faucet dripping or not dripping, the traffic outside filtered through a window that was half-open or closed, she can no longer swear to it. The sound as climate, as temperature of the moment, as the thing that is lost most quickly in the first side and that here, in this side without a listener, still has something of its original texture.

This side lasts as long as the hands on the task. When they finish, when the head has to be used for something else again, the memory doesn't completely leave — it moves aside, steps back, returns to the place where it was waiting without her knowing it was waiting.

And the chair remains turned. A few degrees toward the window. As always.

III

The third side is the one that is dreamed.

Not the dream remembered upon waking and told in the kitchen while the coffee brews — that's already the first, already has a listener, already lost something in the passage. The dream itself, while it occurs, before waking puts a name on it and files it away.

In the dream, the kitchen is the kitchen but it's not this kitchen. It has the same proportions as the memory but the proportions are slightly wrong, like when you draw a familiar place from memory and the result looks similar but doesn't convince, there's something in the ceiling's angle or where the door is that the body knows isn't exact though the eyes can't point out where it fails.

And the chair is there.

But in the dream, the chair isn't turned toward the window. It's turned toward her. And someone is sitting — there is always someone sitting on the third side, that's what the dream can do that daytime memory perhaps no longer can: return occupation to empty things, without effort, without will, without the guilty weight of inventing.

She can't see the face. That too is invariable: on the third side, the person is

there but the face isn't available. Not because the dream hides it intentionally but because the face is what is lost most quickly, and the dream, honest in its way, doesn't replace what it no longer has. It puts the body, the posture, the gesture of the hands on the table — those hands yes, the dream remembers them with a precision that waking hurts, a clean hurt, without edges, the kind that doesn't bleed but simply weighs.

There is speaking on the third side. Not always, but sometimes. And what is said isn't what one would have wanted to say — the dream isn't generous in that way, doesn't work like the rehearsal of the speech that was never given. What is said is something else, lateral, almost without importance, the kind of conversation you have when there is time and no urgency and you don't yet know that time is going to run out and that that conversation without urgency was going to be, without anyone deciding it, one of the last.

That's what the dream stores: not the important conversations. The others. The ones that in the first side don't appear because they don't seem to deserve the space, and in the second arrive barely as climate, as background sound. On the third they are the center. On the third, the unimportant is the only thing that matters, because it's the only thing left unspent, without the wear of having been considered significant and told and retold until losing its edge.

She wakes before it ends. Always before.

And the kitchen of the dream retreats slowly, like the mist, always leaving a part of itself outside.

IV

The fourth side is not told, does not arrive alone, is not dreamed.

The fourth side is the one that is missing.

Not as an accidental absence — something lost along the way, that was there and is no longer, that with better memory or better luck could be recovered. It's missing in another way: missing as a constitutive part of the memory, the side that the memory needs not to be there in order to be what it is. The hollow that holds the form from within, like the empty space inside a vessel that is exactly what makes the vessel useful.

She suspected it first with the coin. The twenty-five cent coin that shone in a way no coin actually shines — how much of that shine was the coin and how much was the missing side, the one the memory left unfilled so that something could enter there, something that is neither memory nor invention but the exact pressure of what is not known and yet forms part of what is felt?

It's not forgetting. Forgetting is passive, it's what goes away without being called. The fourth side is active — it's what the memory decides, without consulting her, to keep blank. Like the smell that doesn't enter the first side for custody. Like the face that the dream doesn't replace because it no longer has it. But more deliberate than that, more structural: not an omission but an architecture.

What is on the fourth side?

That is precisely what cannot be answered without destroying it. Naming it would be filling it, and filling it would be losing the only thing that memory, in its wisdom without language, decided to preserve empty: the place where something can still occur. Where her mother's hand can still be firm or trembling depending on the afternoon, where the chair can be turned toward the window or toward her depending on whether there is a listener or not, where the song can have always existed or been born this morning between the cold mate and the cold in her hands.

The fourth side is the possibility that memory reserves for itself.

Not for her. For the memory itself, which also needs, after sixty years of being visited and rewritten and doubted and told and dreamed, a place where nothing has yet happened. A virgin side. A side that doesn't yet know what it will be when someone — she, time, the blue mist entering through the doorjamb of a door that neither of the visible sides can see from where they are — finally occupies it.

That's why the memory doesn't close.

That's why none of the true memories close: not because they're incomplete but because they are, deliberately, making room. Waiting, with the patience of things that have no clock, for what still has no form to arrive, but which the fourth side has already reserved, already prepared, already left blank with the same delicacy with which a larger hand takes a smaller hand before crossing a street.

Without squeezing too tightly.

In case it has to let go.

V

The detailed memory of a love scene

It doesn't begin with love. It begins with a lateral detail, as the things that later turn out to be the most important always begin: a detail that at the time wasn't registered as significant and yet the body stored with a fidelity that the mind didn't ask for and couldn't explain until much later.

A sock.

One single sock, on the floor, next to the bed. Not the pair — the pair was somewhere else, somewhere that doesn't matter now and perhaps never mattered. Only this one, fallen with that particular geometry that things have when they are taken off quickly, without care, without thinking about where they would fall because at that moment there were other things to think about.

She looks at it. She doesn't know why she looks at it — there are other things in the room that would deserve more attention, bigger things, more obvious things, things any responsible narrator would choose to begin with. But she looks at the sock, and the sock returns something she didn't expect: proof that this is really happening, that it's not the third side, that there is a real body in this real room that took off a real sock and let it fall without thinking about where.

That's what love sometimes needs to become credible. Not the grand gesture. The sock on the floor.

What she remembers of the other's body isn't what she should remember according to the conventions of the genre. Not the mouth, not the eyes, not the curve of anything that literature already knows how to name. She remembers the weight. The specific weight of that body upon the world, its way of occupying space, of displacing the air of a room when it enters, of making the objects around it seem slightly different — smaller, or more real, or both at the same time.

And she remembers the hands, but not the way hands are remembered in love scenes. She remembers them at rest. Open, on the sheet, with that particular surrender of hands when they sleep, when they don't have to hold anything, when the body they belong to has finally let go of everything it carried during the day and let it fall, along with the sock, along with the guard, along with the distance that people maintain even with the people they love because maintaining it is such an old habit that it's no longer distinguishable from skin.

The open hands. That's what the memory stores most carefully, what the

dream replaces most faithfully, what in the first side she never says because she doesn't know how to say it without sounding like more than it was: simply open hands, at rest, on a sheet that in memory is always white though perhaps it wasn't.

There was a moment — one, no more, or if there were more this is the one that remained — when they were both silent at the same time and the silence didn't weigh.

That's harder than it seems. The silence between two people almost always weighs something: the discomfort weighs, or the habit weighs, or the word that one of them is about to say and the other already knows they're going to say though they haven't said it yet. This one didn't. This one was a weightless silence, a silence that wasn't waiting for anything, that wasn't the interval between two things but a thing in itself, complete, with its own edges.

She didn't know at the moment that that silence was going to be the one that remained. You never know. If you knew, if there were some sign that announced *this is the moment you'll remember in thirty years, pay attention*, the moment would stop being what it is and become something else, a performance of the moment, a pose of itself.

That's why it remained: because she wasn't watching it when it happened. She was in the silence, not watching it from outside. And when you're inside something, you can't yet know that that something is going to be, with time, the measure by which you'll measure all the silences that come after.

What she doesn't remember:

She doesn't remember what was said before the silence nor what was said after. She doesn't remember if it was night or if dawn was already breaking, though she has a feeling — not a memory, a feeling — of a light that was neither one thing nor the other, the same hinge light of the blue that is neither night nor dawn. She doesn't remember if she was cold or warm, though the body, when it returns to this memory, tends to settle into a neutral temperature, without cold or heat, as if it knew that at that moment temperature didn't matter and that adding one now would be falsifying something that was, exactly, outside of temperature.

She doesn't remember if she was happy. That's the strangest thing to admit, the one that costs her most when the memory arrives without her calling it and stays there, with the sock on the floor and the open hands and the weightless silence: she doesn't know if at that moment she was happy. She knows the moment mattered. She knows the body stored it with a care it didn't ask for. But happiness — that label put on things afterward, when they can already be

seen from outside — that she doesn't find when she searches.

Perhaps because happiness needs distance to know itself as happiness, and at that moment there was no distance, there was only the inside, the silence, the weight of the other body displacing the air.

Perhaps because what was there was something prior to happiness, something for which happiness is only an approximation: the brief sensation of not crossing alone.

The memory ends before the scene ends.

There's no ending. No getting up, no what was said after, no the moment when the room became a room again and they both became two separate people with their own temperatures and their own distances. The memory cuts before, at the quietest point, and stays there.

As if it knew — the memory, which has its own wisdom without language — that what came after no longer belongs to it. That its job was to store this: the sock, the hands, the weightless silence. And that everything that came after, no matter how important, no matter how painful or beautiful, was already another story.

This was this.

The sock on the floor.

The open hands.

A silence that waited for nothing.

And the light that still didn't know which color it would end up becoming.

VI

Buenos Aires

You don't arrive in Buenos Aires. You return.

Even if it's the first time.

That's what she discovers walking down Corrientes at eleven at night, with the noise coming from everywhere at once and that should be chaos and isn't, that should be too much and yet the body receives it as something it knew and had forgotten it knew: this city isn't learned. It's recognized. Like the third side of a memory, like the open hands on the sheet — something that was before one knew it was.

The bookstores open at midnight. That first. The bookstores open at midnight as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if books also needed their night shift and someone long ago had decided to give it to them without asking permission from anyone. She stops in front of a window — doesn't go in yet, is still learning the city though she already knew it — and sees the spines arranged with that logic that only neighborhood bookstores have, a logic that isn't alphabetical or thematic but affective, what the bookseller wanted to put next to what seemed to them should be next to it, and that arbitrariness is more honest than any system.

She thinks: here you can live thinking. That's not possible everywhere.

The Río de la Plata doesn't look like a river.

She had been told that and hadn't believed it because everything she had been told about Buenos Aires seemed like exaggeration from someone who loves their own too much. But the river doesn't look like a river — it looks like the sea without the waves, looks like the sea on a day when the sea decided to stay still and think. The horizon on the other side can't be seen. Not because there's mist, though sometimes there is, but because the other side is too far to be visible and that distance gives the river something that rivers normally don't have: the ability to make whoever looks at it feel they are standing on the edge of something.

She looks at it for a long while, longer than she had planned, with the wind coming off the water that smells of distance, of kilometers of water without visible shore, of Uruguay that is there though you can't see it. And she thinks of the blue mist, of how it entered through the doorjamb looking for someone else's ending so as not to have to keep its own. She thinks this whole city does something similar: it looks out at the river as if the river could carry

something away, as if just looking at it long enough would let the water carry off what one doesn't know how to let go of any other way.

It carries nothing away. The river carries nothing. But the time standing on the edge does something that isn't the same as carrying away but resembles it: it reorganizes. Things don't disappear but return different, with another weight, as if the distance of the water had changed their scale.

There is a Buenos Aires way of being in bars that she took a while to understand and when she understood it seemed to her the most honest of all possible ways of being in a bar.

You don't go to have a drink. You go to be.

The difference is enormous and almost untranslatable for someone who comes from cities where bars are transactional, where you enter with a purpose and leave when the purpose is fulfilled. Here you don't. Here the coffee is the excuse, the minimal push of consumption needed to legitimize what you really came to do, which is simply to be in that place, in that particular light, with that background noise that doesn't interrupt but accompanies, with the open possibility that anything could happen although probably nothing will.

The waiter who doesn't rush. That too. The waiter who knows that rushing would be an incivility of the same category as interrupting someone in the middle of a thought, and that his job isn't to turn tables but to guard the time of whoever is sitting at them.

She orders a cortado. Stays two hours. Writes in a notebook she will later lose or has already lost, it doesn't matter, what matters is the act of writing there, in that light, with that noise that doesn't interrupt. Some cities let you think. This one lets you think aloud, which is different and harder to find.

The architecture is a conversation between centuries that neither interlocutor fully won.

A 1920s building next to a 1950s one next to a 1990s one next to a hole where there was something that's no longer there and the hole still doesn't know what it's going to be. Buenos Aires doesn't have the modesty of cities that decided on one aesthetic and stuck with it. It has the honesty of cities that changed their minds over time and didn't have the resources or the will to erase the previous opinions, so they stacked them, each era on top of the other, producing something that isn't beautiful in the orderly sense of the term but is true in a way that orderly beauty rarely is.

She walks through San Telmo on a Sunday fair day and looks at the facades

and thinks of the four sides of memory, of how each building is also a memory with its visible sides and its blank fourth side, the side that doesn't say what was there before, what was demolished, what fell on its own, what someone decided to cover with a layer of paint that over the years is peeling and underneath appears another color that also isn't the original but the penultimate, and underneath that another, and so on until reaching a wall that no longer remembers its own beginning.

Like her. Like all who walk through this city that also doesn't fully remember its own beginning and yet continues, peeling and urgent and open at midnight, waiting for whoever comes to recognize it even if it's the first time.

The last night.

She doesn't yet know it's the last — that too is known after, never before, never in time to do something different with that information. She's sitting on a terrace with the heat that in Buenos Aires arrives at night more honestly than during the day, a heat that doesn't pretend to be anything else, that doesn't promise to cool down soon, that is simply there as a fact of the world to which the most sensible thing is to surrender.

She listens to the city. From above it sounds different — the noise flattens, loses individual voices, becomes one continuous thing that could be the sea if you closed your eyes and decided it was the sea. She doesn't close her eyes. She looks. Looks at the buildings with their lit windows and thinks of everything happening right now behind those windows, the socks on the floor and the weightless silences and the sobs no one will claim and the potatoes being peeled at this exact moment in kitchens she will never see, with hands that are cold for reasons that have nothing to do with temperature.

She thinks: I'm leaving tomorrow.

And then, without wanting to, without looking for it: *sinto tua falta*, already, before leaving. The lack before the absence. The mist entering through the doorjamb before the door closes.

That too this city taught her, in the time she was there: that you can miss something while you still have it. That *saudade* doesn't need to wait for the afterward. That sometimes it arrives early, punctual, generous in its own way, so that you can really say goodbye instead of realizing you should have done so when it's already too late to go back.

She stays a little longer on the terrace.

The heat doesn't give way.

Neither does the city.

VII

São Paulo

São Paulo doesn't receive you. It absorbs you.

There's no moment of arrival, no recognizable threshold, no instant when the city looks at you and you look at it and you both decide what you're going to be for each other. São Paulo was already happening when you arrived and will keep happening when you leave and your presence in it is a parenthesis that the city neither registers nor needs to register to keep being what it is: the largest city in the southern hemisphere doing what the largest things in the southern hemisphere do, which is existing with an indifference so total it ends up resembling a form of generosity.

Twenty million people. The number means nothing until you're inside and feel it for what it is: not a sum of individuals but an organism, something that breathes together though none of its parts knows it, something that has its own temperature and its own pulse and its own way of moving that isn't the sum of how the parts move but something else, emergent, without a proper name though it has a city's name.

She arrives at night. That matters too: São Paulo at night is different from São Paulo by day in the same way the third side is different from the first, not opposite but parallel, running through the same city but on a frequency that by day isn't captured. At night São Paulo shows what by day it hides under the noise and traffic and urgency of businesses that never close: that beneath all that speed there is something that beats more slowly, something almost still, something that only appears when the city lowers its guard because it thinks no one is watching.

She watches it.

Avenida Paulista at seven in the morning on a Sunday.

Closed. Without cars. The most important avenue in the largest city on the continent, closed, given to whoever wants to walk it, ride it by bike, sit in the middle if they feel like it, as if the city had decided once a week to remember that streets belong to people before they belong to cars and that this reversal of logic needs no explanation, only needs Sunday and the barriers at the sides.

She walks it end to end. From one end to the other and back. Not because she has a destination but because the closed avenue is exactly that: a destination in itself, a place you go to be in it, not to cross it. Like the bars of Buenos Aires but outdoors, without a roof, with the morning sun of São Paulo that doesn't

have the delicacy of the Buenos Aires sun but a more direct honesty, more equatorial, a sun that doesn't negotiate.

In the middle of the avenue there's a lady of about seventy dancing alone.

Not with headphones. With music that only she hears, or that she hears from a source that from where she is she can't see. She dances with that concentration of someone who has been dancing many years and no longer needs to think about the steps because the steps know themselves, and what remains when the steps know themselves is only movement, pure, without the burden of technique.

She stops. Watches her. Thinks of the woman in the bar, of the glass raised toward no one, of the toast without a recipient. Thinks this is the same thing but in reverse: not loneliness that gathers without recognizing itself, but loneliness that dances alone in the middle of a closed avenue and doesn't need anyone to watch it to be completely real.

The lady doesn't look at her.

Keeps dancing.

São Paulo has a way of treating time that she took two days to understand and when she understood seemed to her the most honest: it doesn't stretch it or compress it. It stacks it.

Everything is happening at the same time. The modern building and the favela on the hillside and the museum and the market and the elevated highway with the art someone painted on the pillars because the pillars were there and empty space in a city like this doesn't last, someone always comes to fill it with something, with color, with an image that didn't ask permission to be there and for that very reason has more right than anything that asked permission.

The Mercadão. Inside, the noise is a physical thing, something you touch, something that has its own temperature different from the temperature of the air. The fruit stalls with fruits she doesn't know how to name because they don't have a name in her language, or they have a name but the name doesn't evoke anything because she never had the fruit in her hand before having the word. Here, first the fruit. Afterward, if at all, the word.

She buys something she doesn't know what it is. Eats it standing, in the aisle, with the juice running down her hand, without a napkin, without the delicacy one has when eating something known. This is how the unknown is eaten: with both hands and no net.

She thinks: there are things you can't remember before you've lived them, and yet you spend your life trying.

VIII

Rio de Janeiro

Rio isn't a city. It's a permanent negotiation between stone and water and forest and people, and none of the four fully wins, and that unresolved tension is exactly what makes it impossible to forget and impossible to live without contradiction.

The mountains in the middle of the city. That first, that always, because the mountains in the middle of the city change something fundamental in the way space works: no straight line is possible, no way to go from one side to the other without turning, without going up, without going down, without accepting that the city has its own geometry that didn't consult any urbanist before deciding. The city grew around the obstacles and the obstacles became the city and now no one remembers, looking at a hill covered in houses, which came first.

She goes up to Christ on a cloudy day. That matters too: Christ on a cloudy day isn't the Christ from the photos, doesn't have the blue background, doesn't have the open horizon. It has clouds at foot height, has the city peeking through wisps of mist — another mist, not blue this time but white, a mist that has no intentions, that seeks nothing, that is there simply because the mountain gathered it and the cloud had nowhere to go.

From up there, with the mist covering and uncovering the city in turns, she understands something she hadn't understood in Buenos Aires and had intuited in São Paulo but hadn't finished naming: that the cities that matter don't let themselves be seen whole. They always keep something, always have a side the mist covers, a neighborhood unreachable from where you're standing, a story happening at this exact moment three kilometers away that will never cross paths with your own.

Like the fourth side of memory. Like the face the dream doesn't replace.

The beach.

Not Copacabana, which is too famous to be just a beach, which carries the weight of everything said about it before you arrive and for that reason is hard to see without the noise of what is already known. Another one, smaller, found by mistake one afternoon when she took the wrong bus and decided that taking the wrong bus in Rio wasn't a problem but a method.

The sand whiter than she remembered having seen anywhere. The water greener than blue, a green that isn't the green of the countryside but the green

of something that has depth, that keeps things below that from the shore can't be seen. And the sound — the sound of that specific beach, at that specific hour, with that number of people that wasn't many nor few but the exact number for the space to breathe.

She goes into the water.

The cold — again the cold, always the same cold that doesn't quite belong — and then, when the body accepts the temperature and stops resisting, something that isn't exactly warmth but the absence of cold, which isn't the same but sometimes feels the same.

She floats.

That's all: she floats. With her ears underwater where the sound of the world becomes something else, slower, deeper, as if the water filtered the high frequencies and let only the ones that matter pass through. The sky above, very blue now, without clouds, with that blue that in Rio seems more decided than anywhere else, a blue that isn't looking to become another color yet.

She thinks, with her ears underwater, of the weightless silence. Of the open hands. Of the lady dancing alone on the closed avenue. Of the mist that entered through the doorjamb looking for someone else's ending.

She thinks of nothing. Both at the same time.

The water holds her without asking for anything in return.

For a moment — one, no more is needed — she isn't crossing any street alone.

IX

There are places I will remember

At seventy, you already know which ones.

Not all — that's the surprise, that's the thing no one warns you about: that some haven't revealed themselves yet, that the list isn't closed, that a new place can appear at this stage of life and stay with the same force as the ones from fifty years ago, as if the heart had no maximum capacity for this kind of thing and kept accepting entries without telling reason.

But the ones she already knows: those she knows with a precision she has for nothing else. She knows them in her body. Not in memory, which is treacherous and rewrites, but in the body, which stores in its own way, without words, without chronology, without the tidy order the mind would impose. The body knows there is a kitchen with afternoon light. Knows there is a beach with green water and decided sky. Knows there is an avenue closed on a Sunday, and a terrace with heat that doesn't give way, and a doorjamb through which something blue entered that wasn't exactly mist but that she will always call that.

Those places aren't visited. They are inhabited, even when you're not there. Even when it's been years since you were there. Even when returning is no longer possible.

There are people who are no longer here.

That's the first thing that changes at a certain age: the proportion. For a long time, those who leave are the exception and those who remain are the rule, and you can treat each loss as an extraordinary event, give it the space it deserves, mourn with the attention mourning requires. Later, at some moment that also doesn't announce itself, the proportion reverses. Not suddenly — suddenly would have been easier to identify, easier to name. Little by little, one by one, until one day you do the count without wanting to and discover there are more on the other side than on this one.

She doesn't do the count. She learned not to.

But she knows them anyway, those who left, she carries them in a way that isn't the active mourning of the early times nor the forgetting that some attribute to time and that in her experience time doesn't produce, not with this kind of thing. She carries them as one carries something that is already part of one's own weight: without noticing it most of the time, with sudden and inexplicable consciousness at certain moments, before certain lights, at certain

hours of the afternoon that have the same temperature as another afternoon she can no longer locate exactly but that the body recognizes without hesitation.

A song she doesn't remember learning and yet knows whole.

That's how she carries them.

And there are people who remain.

That too changes at a certain age: the way of seeing those who remain. When you were young, those who remained were simply those who were there, the background against which life occurred, presences so constant that precisely because of their constancy they became invisible, like air, like gravity, like all the things without which existence would be impossible and for that very reason are rarely thanked.

Now no. Now each of those who remain is a small miracle of continuity, something that could have not made it here and did, something fragile that sustains its own fragility with a dignity that before she didn't know how to see or didn't take the time to see because there were other urgent things, there were always other urgent things.

She looks at them differently. Listens to them differently. When someone who remains tells her something — something small, something with no apparent importance, the kind of thing before she would have listened to with half attention while thinking about what she was going to say next — now she stays there, in that small thing, in that detail that the other person perhaps doesn't even know they're giving, and she keeps it. Not to tell it. To have it.

Because by now she already knows what took her too long to learn: that the small things are what remain. The coin, the sock on the floor, the open hands. Not the grand gestures, not the moments that at the time seemed like the ones that would matter. The other. What no one archived intentionally because no one knew it had to be archived.

There is a place she hasn't yet visited and she already knows she will remember.

She doesn't know which one. That's the strange part and the one she doesn't know how to explain to anyone without sounding crazy or old or both: that there is a place that doesn't yet exist in her experience and yet already has the weight of the ones that do, already occupies space on that list the body keeps without consulting her.

She feels it as one feels what is about to rain before the first drop falls, when the air has already changed color. She doesn't know where it is. Doesn't know if it's a city or a room or a shore or a doorjamb. Doesn't know if she was already near it without recognizing it or if it's still to come.

She knows it exists. Knows that when she gets there — if she gets there, when she gets there — she will know it was that one. She won't have to think about it. The body will recognize it before the mind finds the words, the same way it recognized Buenos Aires the first time, the same way it recognizes those who remain when she looks at them now, with this new attention it cost her seventy years to learn to have.

At seventy there's a question she stops asking.

Not because she answered it. Because she learned it has no answer and that's not a failure but an exact description of how the questions that matter work: they aren't answered, they are inhabited. They are lived around, surrounded, their shape is found from outside because from inside they have no shape, or have too many shapes at once for any to be definitive.

The question was: what remains?

The answer she no longer seeks but that nevertheless comes to her, sometimes, in moments without hinges, in days without yesterday or tomorrow: this. The places. The people who remain. The exact weight of those who are no longer here, which is no less weight for their absence, quite the opposite. The coin shining in a way no coin actually shines. The silence that waited for nothing. The water holding her without asking for anything in return.

And the song that returns without anyone calling it.

Always the same song, always off-beat, always in the moment when the hands are busy with something else and the head was left free without anyone planning it.

There are places I will remember.

Not as a promise. As a verification.

As the only certainty that at this point doesn't need to defend itself before any tribunal, not even before the one she herself forms when she stays alone with the questions that have no answer.

She already remembers them.

She's already remembering them.

Right now, in this light, with this cold in her hands that doesn't correspond to the room's temperature and that she's stopped trying to explain.

X

Death as a companion

It didn't arrive suddenly. That's the first thing to say, to dismantle the version that circulates, the dramatic version with a date and a hinge and a clearly demarcated before and after. There was no moment of revelation. There was no dark night of the soul nor sudden awakening with the shattering certainty of one's own finitude.

It arrived as things that stay arrive: little by little, without announcing itself, occupying more and more space until one day you realize it was already there for a while and that the space it occupies isn't space it took from something else but space that was always its own and that she, by distraction or by youth or by the urgencies that at a certain stage of life don't let you see beyond the immediate, simply hadn't noticed.

At seventy you can't not notice.

It's not fear she feels. That too must be said because fear is what's expected, what the available narrative about old age and death prepares the reader to find, and she doesn't want to be dishonest by omission: it's not fear. Or it's fear but so mixed with other things that calling it only fear would be the kind of simplification she can no longer afford at this point.

It's more like what she feels when she looks at the river from the shore. Something big, something that owes no explanations, something that will keep happening regardless of what she thinks or feels or says about it. The river doesn't negotiate with those who look at it. Neither does death. And there is in that intransigence, paradoxically, something that isn't hostile. Something that could almost be called honest.

Death doesn't promise her anything it can't deliver.

In that, it differs from almost everything else life offered her over seventy years.

She learned to recognize it in small things before having to face it in the big ones.

In the taste of a fruit she eats knowing, with a calm certainty and without drama, that there is a finite number of times she will eat that fruit again. Not necessarily a small number, not a countdown with a date, but finite. Countable in principle though not in practice. Before, that thought would have been a shadow, would have darkened the taste. Now it doesn't. Now the taste and the

finitude coexist in the same instant without either taking anything from the other, quite the opposite: finitude returns to taste something that abundance had taken away without her noticing, a kind of specific gravity, a density that infinite things can't have because infinity dilutes them.

In the light of a certain hour of the afternoon she no longer takes for granted. In the sleep of certain nights she thanks upon waking without exactly knowing whom. In the conversations she now ends differently, without the old rush, without the feeling that there will always be another opportunity to say what went unsaid.

Because she already knows there won't always be another opportunity. That too death as a companion teaches, not as a threat: that conversations have a number, that hugs have a number, that afternoons looking through a window with a cooling cup have a number, and that the number isn't the problem. The problem was believing there was no number.

Those who left taught her more about this than anything else.

Not with their death — with their absence. With the space they left, which has such a precise shape that sometimes she can trace its edges without meaning to, can feel exactly where the world ends and the hollow begins. Those hollows don't fill. That too she knows now, without particular sadness, as one knows winter comes after autumn: not as fate but as structure. The hollows don't fill because they aren't meant to fill. They are meant to remind her of the exact shape of what was there.

And in that exact shape, in that perfect negative, she can still see, with a clarity that time didn't erase but sharpened, what was. The way of entering a room. The specific gesture of hands when someone truly listened. The particular silence of certain people, which wasn't absence of sound but a presence of its own, a climate.

Death as a companion taught her to read the hollows. And the hollows, read well, say more than many presences.

There is a conversation she has with her, sometimes, on Sunday nights when the silence has that thick texture she already knows and no longer fears.

Not aloud. Not with words, either, exactly. It's more like what happens when you're with someone you trust and don't need to speak for the company to be real. They're both there, she and death, in the same silence, without either demanding anything from the other.

She doesn't ask for more time. She decided that some years ago and hasn't

reconsidered: not asking for more time because time isn't the problem. The time she had was what it was and what she did with it was what she did and no additional amount is going to change that fundamentally. What she did well is already done. What she didn't do she won't do, with more time or without it.

She asks, if anything, that when it comes it comes at a reasonable hour. Not in the middle of a sentence. Not in the moment when her hands are cold for reasons she still hasn't finished understanding. That it gives her time to put the cup on the floor, to see the last light enter through the window, to hear once more that song that returns without anyone calling it.

Death, in those conversations, promises nothing.

But it doesn't say no either.

What changed, and no one explained to her would change:

Good things taste different. Not better or worse — different. With a concentration they didn't have before, as if finitude were a process of distillation that removes the water and leaves only the essential. A quiet Sunday. The exact weight of a small hand in hers, if there were a small hand available, which sometimes there is. The taste of something eaten standing, without a napkin, with juice running down the hand.

Before, those things were the background. The stage where important things happened. Now they are the important things, and what before seemed important — the achievements, the failures, the battles she won or lost — that moved to the background, settled in without protesting too much, as if it too knew that at a certain distance the hierarchy reorganizes itself and the best thing is not to resist.

Death as a companion taught her that: that the hierarchy was always wrong. That the Sunday with the cold mate was worth as much as anything else she at the time believed was worth more. That the twenty-five cent coin was already, in that moment, everything she needed to know about safety and about love and about what it means for someone to take your hand before crossing a street.

It took her seventy years to understand it.

Death, in its oblique, patient, undramatic way, was the one who finally explained it to her.

She doesn't fear it. Or fears it the same way one fears the river: with a respect

that isn't kin to fear but to something else, something closer to the attention given to what is larger than oneself and for being so deserves to be looked at carefully, without distraction, without the carelessness with which one looks at things believed to be understood.

She doesn't understand it. That too must be said: she doesn't understand it and no longer expects to understand it. Understanding it would be reducing it to the size of the mind, and the mind, which has seventy years of use and some deterioration she doesn't mention aloud, already knows its own limits better than before.

But she knows it.

Knows it the same way one knows the places one will remember: not with the head but with the body, not with words but with that part of oneself that stores without being asked and gives without being ordered.

Death is on the list.

Not at the end.

In between, between the places and the people and the song that returns without anyone calling it. In between, where it always was, where she didn't see it because she was looking the other way, because there were other urgent things, because seventy years is a long time and also nothing and both are true at the same time and will continue being true until the moment they cease to be.

Which isn't today.

Today there is still a window.

And a light that is changing color very slowly, toward something that still has no name, in that hinge between two things where live the blue mist and everything she always knew without knowing she knew it.

XI

There was a time when I was beautiful

She says it without nostalgia. That's the first thing to clarify, because the phrase has the shape of nostalgia and it's not nostalgia, or not only that, it's something more complicated than nostalgia and more honest: it's a verification. Like verifying there was a time when she couldn't read. Like verifying there was a time when her mother's hand was larger than hers. Facts. True and already past and without any instruction on how to feel about it.

There was a time when I was beautiful.

She didn't know it then. That too is part of the verification, the part that costs her most not because it hurts but because it has something absurd, something of a joke that time played on her without her being able to refuse to be the object of the joke: she didn't know it when it was true. She knows it now, when it's no longer true in the same way, when what remains is something else that also has its value but isn't that, isn't that specific thing the mirror returned to her at a certain time and she looked at with a mixture of indifference and criticism and the dull certainty that there was something to correct, something to improve, some distance between what she was and what she should be.

The distance was a lie. Or it was real but in the opposite direction from what she believed.

She doesn't remember the exact moment she understood. There's no photo, no particular mirror, no Sunday morning with revelation. There's something more gradual and stranger: the accumulation of others' looks seen in retrospect, looks that at the time she didn't know how to read and that now, with the distance of years, begin to make sense as certain phrases from books read too young make sense when rereading as an adult, suddenly saying what they never said before though the words are the same.

Someone was looking at her. So simple, so invisible to her at that moment: someone was looking at her with an attention that wasn't casual and she didn't register it because she was busy with something else, with the distance between what she was and what she should be, with the flaw that that day seemed central, with the correction she still hadn't found how to make.

Now she sees the looks. Now she remembers them with a clarity she didn't have at the time because at the time she wasn't storing them, didn't know they had to be stored. She sees them and thinks: ah. So yes. So it was true even if I didn't know it. So there was something there that others could see and I

couldn't, because the hardest distance to calculate was always the one between oneself and one's own body.

The body of now.

She doesn't avoid it in the mirror. That too she decided, at some moment she doesn't remember but her current relationship with the mirror confirms: not avoiding it. Looking at it with the same attention she looks at the river, at the chair turned toward the window, at the open hands on the sheet. Without the judgment that before came automatically, without the list of pending corrections that at a certain stage of life updated itself every morning without anyone asking.

What she sees isn't what it was. That's a fact and facts at this point aren't negotiable.

But there's something the body of now has that the one of then didn't, something she doesn't know if to call dignity or history or simply visible time, time that accumulated in the skin and in the hands and in the way shoulders carry the weight of the day, which is different from how they carried it before, more economical, as if the body had learned over the years not to waste energy holding what doesn't need to be held.

That body was also beautiful. She knows it now, looking at it, the same way she knows the one of then was beautiful without having known it then. She suspects there's a lesson there she hasn't finished learning, or learns too late in each instance for it to serve in the next: that the body you have is always, in some sense that only reveals itself afterward, the correct body.

There was a time when I was beautiful.

And there were people who saw it.

That's what costs her most not with sadness but with something like gratitude, a belated and somewhat foolish gratitude, the gratitude of someone who thanks something they didn't know how to receive at the time and that now, when it's no longer available in the same form, they understand the size of what they were given: that someone looked at her. That someone saw what she couldn't see because she was too busy looking at the distance between what she was and what she should be.

She remembers them. Not all — some yes, others only the contour, the sensation of having been looked at that way, without the name or face attached. And in the memory there's no longer the discomfort of then, no longer the not knowing what to do with that attention, looking away,

minimizing, pretending not. In the memory she can stay there, in that look, and receive it. Finally receive it.

With fifty years of delay.

Without that making it any less real.

What she didn't lose.

This too must be said because the phrase has the shape of an elegy and it's not just an elegy: there was a time when I was beautiful implies that time ended, and it ended, but it doesn't imply that what replaced it is less. It implies it's different. And different isn't a loss, or isn't only a loss, it's also a gain she's still learning to name.

What she didn't lose: the way of entering a place and knowing, before anyone says anything, what the temperature of the air is between the people there. That wasn't beauty, it was something else, and that something else remains intact, even sharpened, as tools that are used well are sharpened with use.

The voice. The voice didn't age the same way as the skin. It has its own marks of time, yes, but it also has something it didn't have before, a weight, a resonance, as if the years had added a lower string that didn't exist when young.

And this: the ability to be in silence with someone without the silence weighing. She didn't have that then. She learned it slowly, over decades of mistaken silences, of silences that weighed too much, of silences she tried to fill when she should have let them be. Now she knows. Now she can sit in the weightless silence and stay there as long as needed, without the urgency to fill it, without the fear of what might appear if she doesn't fill it.

There was a time when I was beautiful.

And there is a time, this, now, when I know that I was.

Both are true. Both have their weight, their value, their place on the list the body keeps without consulting her. The first is the fact. The second is the understanding of the fact, which arrived late but arrived, which arrived when it could no longer change anything but could change something: the way of looking at oneself. The way of receiving what at the time she didn't know how to receive. The way of being in one's own body, which at seventy is more difficult and more necessary than ever, and which she is still learning, still, with the same patient clumsiness with which she learned everything worth learning.

Late.

Always late.

But before it's too late, which isn't the same, which was never the same, though for a long time she believed it was.

XII

First anniversary

It's not a date on the calendar. Or it's a date on the calendar but that's the least of it, that's the shell, the administrative part: a number, a month, the same position of the earth around the sun that a year ago it occupied when what happened happened.

What it is, underneath: the first time the body completes the cycle without the other person. The first spring without. The first winter without. The first day of that month when something always happened and this year happened the same, the world didn't stop, the sun rose at the time it had to rise, the neighbors made the noise neighbors make, and she was there, in the middle of all that imperturbable continuity, with the date on top like carrying something that weighs more than its size suggests.

A year.

The body knows what that means better than the head. The head can make arguments, can tell itself that time heals, can remember that others went through this and continued, can search in language for words that soften. The body doesn't. The body simply registers: a complete cycle without that presence. Each season inhabited again but differently. Each month with its own taste of absence, different from the one before, as if mourning also had its seasons and went through them at its own pace, without consulting her, without asking permission to change shape.

January was the blow.

That needs no explanation. January was the month and the blow and the before and the after and all the things said about beginnings that aren't, about doors that close, about time that will pass and that at that moment cannot be imagined passing because the present is too heavy for the future to fit.

But the other months.

The other months no one mentions and yet they are the real mourning, the mourning that occurs when there's no longer an urgency structure to hold it, when those who were close went back to their lives because life goes on and has reason to go on, when the forms are signed and the things distributed and what remains is only this: Tuesday at three in the afternoon without any particular reason for Tuesday at three in the afternoon to be difficult, and yet.

March was strange. March had something, a smell, a specific autumn light

entering through an east-facing window, that belonged to both of them in a way she hadn't registered until that March arrived without the other person and the smell and the light were the same, the world didn't mourn the absence, and that indifference of the world was harder than anything March could have done if it had intentions.

June was the cold. Not the cold of the hands that doesn't correspond to temperature — that cold she already knew, that cold has another source. The real cold, the winter cold, that arrived as it always arrives and for the first time in many years arrived without anyone on the other side of the bed radiating heat, without that specific weight that another person's sleep gave to the night's silence, making it habitable, making it the correct size.

September was almost beautiful and that was the hardest. Spring with all its apparatus of renewal and promise, the neighbor's garden filling with something lilac she doesn't know how to name, the days extending with that specific September generosity, and she there, in the middle of all that functional beauty, unable to share it with the one who for years was the person with whom she shared things that needed no commentary, only presence.

That's what no one says about mourning: that beauty hurts as much as ugliness. That a beautiful day without the right person is its own kind of loss, no less but different, with its own edges, its own specific weight.

And then the date arrived.

Not suddenly — she already knows that, nothing arrives suddenly though it seems to. It arrived little by little, from a week before, from that moment when the body starts to know without the head having calculated it yet, that foreknowledge the body has for things that matter, that anticipation that isn't anxiety but something quieter, more like preparation.

She got up early. Not because she had planned to get up early — the body got her up, the same body that had carried her through the previous twelve months with a competence she hadn't asked for and yet was grateful for, in silence, more than once, in moments when the head didn't know what to do and the body simply continued.

She made coffee. That first, the most basic, the smallest ritual she has and that for being small turned out to be the most resistant: the morning coffee that existed before the loss and continued existing after, that didn't need to reinvent itself because it was too fundamental to be charged with meaning, too everyday to become a symbol.

She sat in her usual place.

Not in the other person's place. In hers. That too she decided months ago, one of the silent decisions mourning demands and no one lists in any manual: staying in one's own place. Not occupying the other to feel closeness, not emptying it entirely to not feel the absence. Staying in one's own place and letting the other remain the other, empty, present in its emptiness, with the exact shape of what was there.

She thought of the first anniversary of other things.

The first is always the one that weighs most, everyone says that and it's true but not for the reason usually given. It doesn't weigh because it's the most recent. It weighs because it's the first time the body has to learn that that day will return, that the cycle will repeat, that the date isn't a unique event but a recurrence, something the calendar will bring back without her being able to do anything to avoid it or to prepare differently from how she prepared this time.

The second will be different. She doesn't know that yet but she intuits it, the way one intuits things that haven't happened yet but that experience of what happened allows one to sketch: the second will be quieter. Less structured. Without the specific weight of the first, which had the involuntary solemnity of thresholds, of first times, of moments that know themselves to be historic even though one would prefer they weren't.

The second will be more like Tuesdays at three in the afternoon. More like March with its autumn light entering through the east-facing window. More like the real life of mourning, which doesn't happen on marked dates but in the spaces between them, in moments without hinges, in days without yesterday or tomorrow where suddenly, without warning, without apparent reason, something is missing with a precision that time didn't blunt but sharpened.

Mid-morning she went out.

Without a particular destination, which is also a decision: going out without a destination is entrusting direction to the body, which by now knows the city in a way the head can no longer improve. The body knows which streets to avoid not because they're dangerous but because they're too charged, too full of the other times, of the times with. And knows which to seek: the ones that have the correct texture for this kind of day, the ones that ask for nothing, the ones that allow walking without having to be anywhere in particular.

She walked.

The sun that morning had something — she won't say what, she's already learned that naming certain things is reducing them and that some things deserve more respect than that — the sun that morning had something she received without analyzing it, with the same openness with which she had learned, over that year, to receive what the world offered without asking the world why it offered it or if it had the right to offer it.

At some point she stopped.

Not in front of anything in particular. In the middle of some sidewalk, with people passing on both sides, with the city's noise doing what the city's noise does, which is exist without apology.

And she thought, without looking for it, without having planned it: *I survived the year.*

Not as a triumph. As a verification. As the same calm verification with which at seventy one states facts that no longer need adjectives: there was a time when I was beautiful, there are places I will remember, I survived the year.

A fact.

True.

And still without instructions on how to feel about it, which no longer seems to her a problem but an exact description of how this works: without instructions, without a manual, with the body ahead and the head following, one step, then another, on some sidewalk of a city that goes on, that always goes on, with or without her, which no longer seems to her a cruelty but simply the way the world works.

And the world, this morning, worked.

And she was in it.

Still.

XIII

Returning. Always returning.

You don't return to the same place.

That much anyone who has truly returned knows, not as a visitor but as a returner, with the weight of what happened in between from the first time to this. The place is the same in the sense that two photographs taken from the same angle years apart are the same: the geometry matches, the reference points are where they were, but something in the light is different, or something in the one looking is different, and that difference changes everything without changing anything visible.

She returns.

To the city first, which receives her with the characteristic indifference of cities that don't need you to return to keep being what they are. Buenos Aires wasn't waiting for her. Buenos Aires was happening, as always, as if she hadn't been absent a single day, as if absence were such a minor detail it wasn't even worth registering. And in that indifference, paradoxically, there is something like relief: not having to explain how much time passed nor what happened in that time. The city doesn't ask. You arrive and the city simply continues, and you can enter that continuity without having to justify anything.

She returns to the street.

Not to any particular street — to the street as practice, as a way of being in the world that during the year of mourning became hard to sustain, not for reasons she can fully explain but because the street requires a certain disposition toward the unforeseen, an openness to chance encounter, a willingness to be seen by the world and to see the world in return, and there were months when that disposition simply wasn't there, when the body could walk but couldn't be in the street that way, open, available, present.

Now she can.

Not every day. Not always the same way. But she can, and that's different from not being able, it's an enormous distance though from outside it doesn't show.

She walks down Corrientes at an hour that isn't her first time but has its own light, its own noise, its own rhythm of people coming and going with the specific urgency of this city that never finishes deciding if it's in a hurry or just

pretending it is. The bookstores are still open. That too is a kind of return: that the things that mattered are still where she left them.

She stops in front of a window.

Doesn't go in yet. She's still learning to return, and returning has its own rhythms that can't be rushed without something breaking.

She returns to the places of memory.

Not physically — some aren't reachable, some never were because they were interior from the beginning, rooms of memory that never had a postal address. She returns the other way, the one she already knows, the one the text has been describing for twelve chapters without naming directly: the return that occurs on its own, without her summoning it, when her hands are busy with something else and the head is left free.

The kitchen with afternoon light. There it is, the same as always, with the chair turned a few degrees toward the window. The beach with the green water and the sky too blue to be modest. The avenue closed on a Sunday with the lady dancing alone in the middle. The bar that perhaps never existed but returns with the fidelity of things that did exist, with the ownerless sob floating in the air, with the blue mist feeling the wooden floor.

She returns to her mother's hand.

That always. That first, before any other return, with a regularity that no longer surprises her but also hasn't become habit, that keeps something of the first time each time it happens: the weight of the coin, the cold of the metal, the firmness — or the trembling, she'll never be able to swear it — of that larger hand around hers.

She doesn't fear that return. She waits for that return.

She returns to writing.

She hadn't stopped writing entirely — that too isn't true, writing for someone who was always a writer without knowing it doesn't stop entirely, it keeps happening at the edges, in the sentences that assemble themselves while peeling a potato, in the endings invented for other people's conversations. But deliberate writing, the one that sits with intention before something blank and decides to leave a mark, that one was absent for months.

She returns to it as one returns to places: discovering that something changed without anyone touching anything. The same words, the same language, the

same gesture of seeking the phrase that says what the previous phrase couldn't fully say. But something in the speed is different. Something in the disposition to stay in the uncertain, not to rush resolution, to let the text have its fourth side blank and not try to fill it.

The year taught her that, among other things: that hollows have their own shape. That the shape of the hollow says as much as what surrounds it. That writing isn't filling but also, and sometimes above all, knowing where to leave the space.

She returns to him.

Not in the sense that the living return to the living. In the other sense, the one she learned over this year without a manual or instructions: the sense in which those who left remain visitable, not in any physical place but in that geography without coordinates she carries inside and that mourning, far from erasing, made more defined, more detailed, more habitable.

She returns to the open hands on the sheet.

She returns to the weightless silence.

She returns to the sock on the floor, which in the memory remains there, in the same place, with the same geometry of something taken off quickly without thinking about where it would fall, and which no longer produces what it produced before — not the sharp pang of the early months, not the numbness of the middle ones — but something closer to what the coin produces: a calm certainty that it happened, that it was real, that no amount of time will change that it was real.

She speaks to him, sometimes. Not aloud — or aloud but in places where no one can hear her, which are more than people imagine there are in a life. She speaks to him and doesn't expect a response and yet something happens after speaking to him, something in the air of the room, something in the temperature, something she won't be able to defend before anyone who asks for proof and yet happens, with the same silent regularity with which mist enters through the doorjamb: a little, never all, always leaving something outside.

Always returning.

That's the structure, she understands now, of what she always thought was her life but was this: a permanent returning. To the places, to the people, to previous versions of herself that didn't disappear but accumulated, each with its age and its cold in the hands and its unanswered question, forming

something that isn't progression but stratigraphy, layer upon layer, all present at the same time, all equally real, all equally her.

The girl with the coin.

The woman in the bar that perhaps never existed.

The one who floated in the green water with her ears below the surface.

The one who survived the year.

The one who returns now, always returns, to this window with this light that is changing color toward something that still has no name.

All the same.

All returning.

To the same place that isn't the same place, with the same body that isn't the same body, with the same question that doesn't expect an answer but also doesn't stop asking, because stopping asking would be stopping returning, and returning — always returning, even if it hurts, even if the place has changed, even if the one returning is no longer exactly who left — is the only thing she knows how to do at this point with the calm certainty of someone who has spent seventy years practicing without knowing she was practicing.

The door.

The doorjamb.

The mist that enters a little.

Never all.

Always with something outside, available, in case things inside get ugly or in case outside, suddenly, gets interesting.

As always.

As from the beginning.

As now.

XIV

When we made love

She doesn't use the past as a refuge. That first, that as a warning to herself before starting: the past isn't a place to stay but a place to return to, which is different, which also implies a return, a coming back to the present with what the past has to give and that the present alone can't give itself.

When we made love.

She says it in plural. That matters too: not *when he loved me* nor *when I was loved*, constructions that place love as something that occurs upon a person, that comes from outside and lands. The plural says something else: that it was a joint doing, an activity that required both bodies with the same intensity, that didn't work if one of the two wasn't fully there, fully present, fully willing to be seen.

We made.

That word carries more than its size suggests.

What she remembers isn't passion.

Or it's passion but not as the word passion represents it, which in common use has become charged with an urgency, a speed, a temperature that doesn't describe what she stores. What she stores is quieter than that. More concentrated. As if in the memory time had decided to go slower than in real life, slower even than in other memories, as if those moments had occurred in a zone where physics worked differently and that different physics is what the memory preserved.

She remembers the attention.

The mutual attention, which is the hardest thing to sustain between two people and the rarest and the one that when it truly occurs, when both are completely there without any part outside thinking about something else, produces something that has no exact name in any language she knows though Portuguese comes closer than the others.

She remembers being looked at. Not in the general sense, not the everyday look of someone who shares a life with another and looks at them while having breakfast or while arguing or while watching something on television. The other look. The one that occurs when someone decides, consciously or not, to truly see the other person, without the filter of habit, without the screen

of what they already know of each other, as if it were possible after years to return to the first time, not to the inexperience but to the attention of the first time, to that openness that over time closes in all relationships because closing is more economical and because no one can sustain that openness all the time without exhausting themselves.

But sometimes. Sometimes it was possible.

And in those times she felt it in her body, literally in her body, as temperature, as something changing in the air between them, as if the whole room registered that something different was happening though the room had no way of registering anything.

There was one night, one in particular among all, that the memory chose to keep more carefully than the others.

It wasn't the most intense. It wasn't the first nor the last. It was, for some reason that logic can't explain but memory knows well, the one that remained. And what remained of it isn't what anyone would expect to remain of that kind of memory.

The light remained.

A lamp somewhere in the room that didn't give enough light to see everything but enough to not be in complete darkness, an intermediate light, a light that didn't take sides, that let some things be visible and others remain in the zone where imagination completes what the eyes can't reach. That light on her shoulder. That light on the curve of something she can't now specify without the memory losing the quality that makes it irreplaceable.

And the breathing remained.

Not hers. His, afterward, when the making had ended and what remained was the being, which is its own kind of intimacy, different from the previous one, quieter, more exposed in a certain way because in the making there's still something to do and in the being there's nothing to do but be and that requires a different courage, more silent.

The breathing of someone who fell asleep without meaning to, without having decided it, surrendering to sleep with the same trust with which they had surrendered to each other before, with that surrender that is the most honest way of saying: here I am safe. Here I don't need to be on guard.

That's what the memory stored. Not the climax but that moment after, that surrender, that breathing that became slower and deeper until it was clearly

sleep and not waking.

She didn't sleep yet. She stayed there, listening. Looking at the light that still didn't take sides. Thinking, with that kind of thought that arrives whole and from nowhere, that this moment too would return. That she would carry it. That when it was missing — and on some level she already knew it would be missing, that everything is missing, that the only question was when — she would be able to return to it the way one returns to places that matter: without finding it the same but recognizing it all the same.

She was right.

Here it is.

What mourning did to that memory.

This is the hardest to say and therefore the most necessary: mourning didn't erase it. That was what she feared in the early months, that the pain would erase the good memories, dilute them, contaminate them with loss until it was impossible to separate what was from what no longer is.

It didn't happen.

The memory of when we made love survived the year with an integrity that surprised her, that still surprises her each time she returns to it. It survived not intact — nothing survives intact, she already knows that, that's what the text has been saying for twelve chapters in different ways — but whole in what matters. The light. The breathing. The sensation of being in a place where there was no need to be on guard.

What mourning added is a layer that wasn't there before: the awareness of the finitude of that moment, which at the moment itself didn't exist because at the moment itself the body doesn't calculate, doesn't project, doesn't know it's storing something for later. Now yes. Now the memory comes with that awareness incorporated, with the knowledge that that moment was one of the last of its kind, and that awareness darkens it a little and also illuminates it, both at the same time, the same way *saudade* contains both the pain and the strange pleasure of having had something worth missing.

At seventy, this.

Not resignation. Not the easy peace of someone who convinced pain to leave. Coexistence: the memory and the loss living in the same space without either demanding the other leave.

When we made love time went slower.

She didn't invent that in memory. She remembers it from real time, from when it happened: the sensation that outside the world continued at its own pace and inside, in that room with that light that didn't take sides, time had decided to take a pause, see what happened, not rush anything.

Now she understands why.

Because time, which is generous with almost nothing, which takes everything without asking permission, has nevertheless this particularity: in moments when two people are completely present to each other, without any part outside, without the filter of habit, time loosens. It doesn't stop — that would be asking too much. It loosens. As if recognizing that what is happening deserves a little more space than it normally grants.

She recognized it then without naming it.

She names it now.

Late, as always.

Before it's too late, as always.

With the body that is no longer the one of then and that nevertheless remembers, with a fidelity no other part of her can match, what it was to have that specific weight displacing the air of a room, that breathing becoming slower, that light without sides illuminating the curve of something she can no longer see with her eyes but that her hands still know, would still know, if there were something to touch.

There's nothing to touch.

There's the memory.

Which isn't the same.

And which, at this hour, in this light, is all there is and is enough and isn't enough and both are equally true and will continue being so until they cease to be.

Like everything else.

As always.

XV

Sometimes I remember what happiness was like

Not happiness itself. That's what the title says and what must be understood before continuing: she doesn't remember happiness, she remembers what it was like. The shape it had. The contour. Like someone who remembers the shape of a key they no longer have but used for so many years that their fingers still know the weight, still know where the notches were, would still make the gesture of turning it though there's no lock nor door nor anything to open.

Sometimes.

Not always. Not as a practice nor as a discipline nor as the exercise of gratitude that certain books recommend doing every morning, thanking what one had, counting blessings, finding the bright side. Not that. Sometimes, which is the opposite of that: without having sought it, without having summoned it, at the most improbable moment, the same way the mailman's envelope and the cold in the hands and the song she doesn't remember learning return.

Sometimes she remembers what happiness was like.

And what she remembers isn't what she would expect to remember.

It wasn't big.

That's the first thing the memory returns and that always surprises her anew, as if each time she returns she has to relearn the same lesson: happiness wasn't big. It didn't have the size of the moments that at the time seemed like the ones that would matter, the achievements, the trips, the nights prepared to be memorable and for that very reason carried too much weight to be what they wanted to be.

It was small.

It was the size of an afternoon with no particular plan that suddenly had the exact texture of what an afternoon should be. The size of a conversation that started in one place and ended in a completely different one without anyone having directed it, following its own thread, going where it wanted to go. The size of a meal that turned out well for no specific reason, without having done anything different from other times, and for that very reason tasted of something that planned-to-be-special meals rarely achieve.

The size of laughing.

That above all. Happiness very often had the shape of laughter, not social laughter, not laughter produced because the context requires it, but the other one, the one that arrives without warning, that takes the body by surprise, that for a moment makes everything that isn't that moment stay outside, suspended, waiting patiently for the laughter to end so it can return with its demands.

That laughter. Sometimes she remembers that laughter.

And remembering the laughter is the closest she can get to remembering happiness itself, because laughter was its most honest form: without pretension, without effort, without the burden of having to be what happiness is supposed to be.

It had accomplices.

Happiness was rarely solitary. That too the memory returns with a consistency she hadn't noticed until she started looking: there was almost always someone. Not necessarily a multitude, not necessarily a celebration. Sometimes one person. Sometimes it was enough that that person was in the same room doing something completely different, reading, or looking out the window, or peeling something in the kitchen, for happiness to have the space it needed to exist.

Presence without demand.

That was the accomplice: someone who was there without requiring anything from that being-there, without the presence being a demand disguised as company. Someone with whom the silence didn't weigh. Someone whose breathing in the same room was enough for the air to have a different quality, more habitable, more the correct size.

She remembers them all, the accomplices. Not with sadness — or with sadness but not only with sadness, with that mixture she already knows, the one of *saudade*, the pain and the strange pleasure of having had something worth missing. She remembers them with a gratitude that at the time she didn't know she felt and that now, when they're no longer all there, or when they are but distance made them something else, is so clear and so clean it almost hurts from how sharp it is.

Thank you, she thinks, without a specific recipient, to the air, like that time with the Portuguese. Thank you for being in the same room without demanding anything. For breathing that air. For being the accomplice without

either of you knowing that that was what was happening.

There were moments when happiness knew itself.

That's rare and that's why she remembers it with the precision with which one remembers rarities: there were moments when while it was happening she knew it was happening, without the usual delay, without the distance that normally exists between experience and recognition of experience.

She was there, in the middle of some ordinary afternoon with the right light and the right accomplice and the laughter that arrived without warning, and at some point in that afternoon something in her stopped for a second, just a second, and said: this. This is. Right now, this.

She didn't ruin it by naming it aloud. She learned early that naming it was the fastest way for it to leave, that happiness is evasive with words, that the moment you point it out it becomes observed and what is observed changes by the fact of being observed. She said it inside, only inside, in that language without words that the body uses when it knows something the mind can't yet formulate.

This.

And then she continued, without doing anything different, without trying to preserve it or prolong it or photograph it with any device because that too would have changed it. She continued simply being in that, knowing she was, until it ended, which ended as all things that aren't held end: alone, without drama, sliding toward what's next with the same discretion with which mist retreats when it decides it's been inside long enough.

What happiness wasn't.

It wasn't the absence of pain. She understood that late, later than she should have understood it, because for a long time she sought happiness in intervals without pain, in periods where nothing hurt, and those periods existed but they weren't what she was looking for, they were something else, closer to relief than to happiness, and relief has its value but it's not the same.

Happiness could coexist with pain. That was the surprise. There could be something that hurt, something pending, something unresolved, and yet in the same afternoon, the same hour, the same body that carried that pain, something could appear that wasn't its negation but its parallel: a laugh, a light, a presence without demand.

Both at the same time.

Always both at the same time, that's what took her seventy years to accept as the normal condition of human experience and not as a failure, not as a sign that something was wrong or that the happiness she felt wasn't pure enough to deserve that name.

It was pure. It was the only kind of purity available to someone who lives in the real world: impure with other things, mixed, coexisting with what wasn't it. And that mixture didn't diminish it. It made it more real. More the size of a true life and not of a life imagined from outside life.

Sometimes she remembers what it was like.

And in remembering something happens that she didn't expect when she started noticing she remembered: that the memory isn't just memory. That in the act of remembering what happiness was like, something of what it was like appears. Not the complete happiness, not the afternoon with the right light and the accomplice and the laughter without warning. Something smaller. An echo. A frequency that memory tunes and that the body, which stores everything without being asked, recognizes.

It's not the same as having it.

But it's something.

It's proof that it existed, that it was real, that the body keeps it with the same care with which it keeps her mother's hand and the weightless silence and the breathing growing slower in a room with a light that didn't take sides.

Sometimes she remembers what happiness was like.

And in that sometimes, in that remembering without having sought it, in that moment when the body tunes the frequency without the head having decided, there is something she doesn't know how to name without reducing it.

Something that resembles, barely, from a distance, the same way the memory of a place resembles the place, what it was like.

To what still, sometimes, without seeking it, is.

XVI

A life of births

Not only her own.

That would be too easy and too inaccurate: reducing births to the first one, to the only one that occurred without her being able to participate in the decision, to the one given to her as things not chosen are given and that nevertheless define everything, the starting point, the coordinate from which everything else is measured.

That was the first. But it wasn't the only one.

A life, if looked at with sufficient attention, is a succession of births. Some announced, some completely unexpected, some that at the time seem like something else — a loss, an ending, a closing door — and only later, with the distance that time sometimes grants and sometimes denies, reveal themselves as the beginning of something that still had no shape but was already beginning to have it, underneath, in the place where things gestate before they can be seen.

The birth of the writer.

It had no date. She already said that, already knows it, already accepts it as the specific condition of that birth: that there was no inaugural moment, that it was always there, that what happened wasn't a beginning but a recognition. But recognition is also a birth, perhaps the most difficult of all because it requires seeing what was always there without anyone having pointed it out, without there being a mirror of the right type at the right moment to return the complete image.

What was born wasn't the capacity. The capacity was there before there were words to name it. What was born was the permission. The permission to call oneself what one always was, to occupy that place without apology, without the qualifier of those who minimize — *I write a little*, *I sometimes jot things down* — without the gesture of making smaller something that wasn't small so it would fit in the space the world assigned it.

That birth was late. It doesn't matter. Late births have their own dignity, their own gentle violence, their own inaugural cry that in this case wasn't a cry but something closer to the relief of someone who finally lets fall something they carried too long without knowing they were carrying it.

Birth in love.

That one did have a moment. It had even, if she thinks about it, it had a place: a room she doesn't remember precisely but that the body knows, a light that could have been any afternoon but was that afternoon, that light, that instant when something in her understood that what was happening was different from what had happened before and that that difference wasn't of degree but of nature.

It wasn't immediate. That too must be said because the version circulating about love and its beginnings tends toward instantaneity, lightning, a clearly demarcated before and after. It wasn't like that. It was more like what happens when eyes adapt to darkness: gradually, without there being an exact moment when darkness becomes twilight and twilight becomes something you can see, but with a result that at some point is undoubtable, that no longer requires effort to recognize.

At some point she knew. And that knowing was a birth: that of a version of herself that didn't exist before, that that love made possible, that without that specific love, with that specific person, at that specific time, couldn't have been.

Loss doesn't undo that birth. That's what she learned in the year without a manual: that what was born in love survives love, not intact, not without marks, but it survives. It's still part of who she is now. It's still one of the births that compose her.

Birth in pain.

This is the one no one chooses and no one forgets.

There is a pain that transforms. Not all pain — that too would be inexact, romanticizing suffering in a way that doesn't do justice to what suffering actually is, which many times is just suffering, without redemption, without lesson, without the tidy narrative later imposed on it. But there is a pain, a certain type, a certain intensity, a certain duration, that does something lesser pain doesn't: it forces a reorganization so deep that the person who emerges on the other side isn't exactly the same as the one who entered.

Not better. Not worse. Different.

She knows because she lived it more than once. Knows the difference between pain that passes and pain that transforms. Knows that the second has a specific texture, a weight that doesn't yield the same way, a presence that for months or years occupies all available space without asking permission and without offering apologies.

And she knows, because she lived it to the end the times she lived it, that on the other side there is something. Not relief necessarily, not the restoration of what was before because what was before no longer exists. Something new. A birth that no one would have chosen if they'd had another option but that happened, that produced something that otherwise wouldn't have existed, that is now part of the stratigraphy, of the layers that accumulated without anyone planning them and that together are what she is at seventy in this window with this light.

The birth of children.

That has its own chapter in memory and she won't try to summarize it because it can't be summarized, because any sentence she chooses will be true and insufficient at the same time, and at this point she prefers honest insufficiency to a summary that sounds complete and isn't.

She will say only this: that when the first was born, a part of her was also born that didn't exist before and couldn't have existed otherwise. A part that has no proper name, that doesn't fit in any category she knew before that moment. A part that from then on lives with a type of vulnerability that isn't chosen and can't be returned: the whole world, suddenly, with a new body in it that could get hurt, that could get lost, that depended on her in ways that would keep her awake for years with half her attention always placed there, on that body, even as the body grew and went far away and had its own life and its own blue mist entering through its own doorjamb.

That birth was also hers.

The most unexpected. The most total.

Birth in places.

She discovered this late and names it now because in this text late discoveries have their place equal to early ones, equal to the ones still to come: that places also gave birth to her. That there are versions of her that only exist because Buenos Aires existed, and Rio, and the beach with green water, and the kitchen with afternoon light, and the bar that perhaps never existed but gave birth to her all the same, that produced something in her that without that bar, real or invented, wouldn't have existed.

Places as midwives.

That image comes to her and she lets it stay: places as midwives, helping to bring out something that was already inside but needed a specific space, a specific light, a specific smell, to come out. To be seen. To be, finally, what it

was.

And this.

This birth, now, in this text.

She didn't expect it when she started, or didn't know it was a birth that was happening. She thought it was something else: an exercise, a recovery, a way of ordering what the years had accumulated without apparent order. She didn't know that ordering can also be engendering. That putting into words what was always in the body isn't just transcription but creation, that something that didn't exist as form exists now, that writing gave birth to something that living alone couldn't have given birth to because living doesn't have the necessary distance, lives too inside itself to see itself.

The text saw her.

That too is a birth: being seen. By the text, by whoever reads it, by herself in the act of writing it and discovering, in the writing, things she didn't know she knew, versions of herself she didn't know existed, layers she didn't know she had.

A life of births.

Seventy years of beginning, again, always again, without any beginning canceling the previous one, without any birth making the previous one cease to have happened. All present. All her. All alive in the specific way those who have already been born are alive and continue being, even though time has passed, even though the form has changed, even though they're no longer exactly what they were when born.

Like her.

Who was born once, seventy years ago, in a place she no longer remembers precisely but that the body knows.

And since then hasn't stopped being born.

And has no intention of stopping.

Not yet.

Not today.

Today there is still a window and a light changing color and something inside

that hasn't finished taking the shape it wants to take and needs, still, a little more time, a little more space, a little more of this specific light entering through this specific window before it can be what it's going to be.

Which it still doesn't know.

Which it still doesn't need to know.

XVII

Song for my death

She didn't write it before because she didn't know how to start it.

That's the honest part: not fear, not resistance, not the refusal of someone who looks away from what they don't want to see. Simply she didn't know where to enter. Death as a companion she already knows, she's already spoken to it, they already coexist on Sundays of thick silence with a familiarity that isn't intimacy but approaches it. But the song is something else. The song implies a form, implies a rhythm, implies that something as irregular as one's own death can fit into something as structured as a melody.

And yet.

The songs that matter most never asked permission to exist. They arrived like the music she doesn't remember learning: whole, with tune and all, in the moment when her hands were busy with something else and her head was left free without anyone planning it.

This one will also arrive like that.

Or it already arrived and this is it.

She doesn't want it to be sad.

That first, that as the only instruction she allows herself before starting: that it not be sad in the way songs written for deaths are sad, with the weight of solemnity, with the certainty that what corresponds is mourning and twilight and a voice dropping to the register where words weigh more.

Not that.

She wants it to have something of Sunday afternoons, something of the laughter that arrives without warning, something of the lady dancing alone on the closed avenue without needing anyone to watch her to be completely real. She wants whoever hears it — if someone hears it, if someone exists, if there is an afterward where these things are heard — to be able to recognize in it not only what is leaving but what was there, which is a different and larger thing and more worthy of a melody.

That it have the rhythm of Corrientes at eleven at night.

That it have the temperature of the green water before the body accepts the

temperature and stops resisting.

That it have, somewhere in its structure, the weightless silence. That too. That the weightless silence be a note, or the pause between two notes, or the moment when the melody decides not to resolve yet and stay there, suspended, waiting.

The lyrics.

If it had lyrics — and perhaps it doesn't, perhaps it's better without lyrics, perhaps there are things that melody can say that words would ruin with their tendency to specify what doesn't need specifying — if it had lyrics it would say this:

That it came in time.

Not off-time, not too soon, not before what needed to be finished was finished. In time, which doesn't mean at the exact moment she would have chosen but at the moment when life, which has its own wisdom without language like memory, decided it was enough. That what needed to be born had already been born. That what needed to return had already returned. That the window had given enough light for what the light had to give.

That she wasn't alone.

Not at the end — she doesn't know that yet and won't know it until it arrives, and perhaps won't know it even then. But along the way. That along the way there were accomplices and there were places and there was a larger hand around hers before crossing a street and there was a breathing growing slower in a room with a light that didn't take sides and there was laughter, a lot of laughter, the kind that takes the body by surprise and leaves everything else outside for a moment.

That it was worth it.

That too in the lyrics, that above all: that it was worth it. Not in the sense of balance, not after adding the good and subtracting the bad and seeing if the result is positive. In the other sense, the one that doesn't require arithmetic: that the fact of having been, of having had a body in the world, of having felt the cold in her hands and the water holding her and the coin shining in a way no coin actually shines, that all of that was worth it by itself, without needing to have served for anything else, without needing to have produced anything that justifies having been.

She was.

That's enough.

The chorus.

Every song that respects itself has a chorus, something that returns, something that the listener starts to expect after hearing it the first time and that when it arrives produces that specific recognition of things that return: not surprise but confirmation, the pleasure of something being as expected.

The chorus of this song she knows.

She's been carrying it for seventy years without knowing it was a chorus. She's been carrying it since she was a girl with a coin in her hand standing on a street she can no longer locate on any map. She's been carrying it from the bar and from the kitchen and from the beach and from the closed avenue and from all the windows she looked through over a life that was, among other things, a life of windows.

She won't write it.

It's already written. It's in every page of what came before, in every return, in every birth, in every moment when something in her said inside, without words, in the language without words that the body uses when it knows something the mind can't yet formulate:

This.

This is.

Right now, this.

The end of the song.

Songs end. That's what makes them songs and not something else: that they have an ending, that at some point the melody decides it's said what it had to say and stops, not because it ran out but because the silence that follows is also part of the song, perhaps the most important part, the one that gives meaning to everything before by showing that what came before could stand on its own, that it didn't need to continue to be what it was.

The end of this one she doesn't choose.

That too is honest: the end of this song is chosen by the song, as all the things that mattered chose their own endings, which never ended when she would have wanted them to but when they had to, with that wisdom without

language that things larger than the one who lives them have.

What she does choose: that the last sound not be pain.

That it be something else. That it be the cold in her hands finally finding its temperature. That it be the mist that after so many nights entering a little, never all, finally decides to stay. That it be the coin in the palm of a hand that is no longer small but that in memory remains that one, with that skin, with that absolute security of someone being held by something larger before crossing the last street.

That it be music.

That it be that specific music that returned so many times without anyone calling it, in the kitchens and on Sundays and in the moments between one thing and another when her head was left free and her body knew, always knew, exactly which song was needed.

That one.

Let it be that one.

And then the silence that is also part of the song.

And then.

Note on the translation

The Portuguese words *saudade* and *sinto tua falta* have been kept in the original throughout the translation, as the text itself reflects on their untranslatability. They appear italicized in the English version, as they do in the Spanish original, to mark their status as borrowed terms carrying meanings that resist translation